

# cineACTION

ISSUE 61  
2003

## NEW CANADIAN CINEMA

Quebec's Next  
Generation

Pacific Wave  
Canuxploitation!

Latino Films

Eros and Wonder

Toronto Festival

03/15  
RICH'S  
CIGAR STORE  
\$8.00

\$8 CDN \$7 US





## THE COLLECTIVE

Scott Forsyth  
Florence Jacobowitz  
Richard Lippe  
Susan Morrison  
Robin Wood

Design: Bob Wilcox

*CineAction* is published three times a year by the *CineAction* collective.

## SINGLE COPIES

\$8CDN \$7US

## SUBSCRIPTIONS:

1 year subscription

Individual, 3 issues \$21

Institutions, 3 issues \$40

2 year subscription

Individual, 6 issues \$36

Institutions, 6 issues \$70

For postage outside Canada

US pay in US funds

Overseas add \$15 for 1 year,

\$25 for 2 year subscription

## MAILING ADDRESS:

40 Alexander St., # 705  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada, M4Y 1B5  
Telephone 416-964-3534

**SUBMISSIONS** are welcomed. The editors do not accept responsibility for loss.

The opinions expressed in individual articles are not necessarily endorsed by the editorial collective.

All articles herein are copyright February 2003 by *CineAction* and may not be reproduced without permission.

We would like to thank the Canada Council for their generous support.

*CineAction* is owned and operated by *CineAction*, a collective for the advancement of film studies. *CineAction* is a non-profit organization.

ISSN 0826-9866

Printed and bound in Canada.

**STILLS:** Thanks to Film Reference Library, Toronto; Toronto International Film Festival; Elena Feder, Diane Sippl, Diane Burgess

**FRONT COVER:** *Dirty* (1998)

**BACK COVER:** *Eros and Wonder* (2003)



THE CANADA COUNCIL | LE CONSEIL DES ARTS  
FOR THE ARTS | DES ARTS  
SINCE 1957 | DEPUIS 1957

## UPCOMING ISSUES

Issue 62

### CLOSE READINGS

Edited by Robin Wood

Submission deadline Aug. 1

Issue 63

### 1950s AESTHETICS:

#### Film in Transition;

#### Minelli centenary

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz

and Richard Lippe

Submission deadline Nov. 1

### SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

see page 72 for details

2 **WOTCHA LOOKIN' AT, ANYWAY?** by Peter Harcourt  
An Examination of Point-of-view in Denys Arcand's *Stardom*

10 **QUEBEC'S NEXT GENERATION** by George Melnyk  
From Lauzon to Turpin

18 **BLOOD IN THE MAPLE SYRUP** by Aaron Taylor  
Canon, Popular Genre and the Canuxploitation of Julian Roffman

29 **CHARTING THE COURSE OF THE PACIFIC NEW WAVE**  
by Diane Burgess

34 **INTERVIEW WITH R. BRUCE ELDER** by Aysegul Koc

40 **BEYOND THE HOMELAND** by Elena Feder  
A Comparative Introduction to Latino Film in Canada and the U.S.

52 **SEEING AND BEING SEEN IN MEDIA CULTURE** by Darrell Varga  
Shelley Niro's *Honey Moccasin*

58 **BORDER CROSSINGS** by Rochelle Simmons  
Representations of North American Culture in  
Bruce McDonald's *Highway 61*

## TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

62 **THE CONSEQUENCES OF SEDUCTION**  
*Adolphe* reviewed by Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe

64 **THE INTENDED** reviewed by Robin Wood

65 **UNKNOWN PLEASURES** reviewed by Shelly Kraicer

66 **MAKING AND REMAKING CLASS IN KEN LOACH'S RECENT FILMS**  
reviewed by Scott Forsyth

67 **FRUIT CHAN'S 'EXCREMENTAL VISION'**  
*Public Toilet* reviewed by Susan Morrison

## INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL MANNHEIM-HEIDELBERG

68 **WHEN FICTION TURNS REAL**  
*Suspending Disbelief* reviewed by Diane Sippl

70 **ALLAN KING, FILMMAKER**  
Book Review by Janice Kaye



## NEW CANADIAN CINEMA

This special issue devoted to filmmaking in Canada is the 6<sup>th</sup> in our magazine's history. As always when discussing films in Canada, these writers range across regions, genres, qualities, themes, politics—and a characteristic diversity among the filmmakers themselves.

Looking at film in Quebec, we have a discussion of the new generation of Quebec film directors and Peter Harcourt offers a close look at a recent film by one of the masters, Denys Arcand. We are introduced to recent and new work by Mohawk filmmaker Shirley Niro, by Latino Canadians and by a group, perhaps a wave, of West Coast artists. Aaron Taylor takes us back to the 60s for the genesis of, unlikely as it seems, what he calls Canuxploitation films. We feature an interview with R. Bruce Elder on the occasion of the premiere of the esteemed experimental filmmaker and theorist's most recent film. *Highway 61*, the Canadian road movie classic, gets a look from a different perspective.

Finally, we have a collection of reviews from the annual Toronto International Film Festival, a short report from International Filmfestival Mannheim-Heidelberg in Germany and a review of a book on another master of Canadian film, Allan King.

Scott Forsyth





# Wotcha lookin' at, anyway?

AN EXAMINATION OF  
POINT-OF-VIEW IN  
DENYS ARCAND'S *STARDOM*

by Peter Harcourt

Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it. But if it should happen otherwise, the danger is not great; and I have learned, from long experience, never to apprehend mischief from those understandings I have been able to provoke; for anger and fury, though they add strength to the sinews of the body, yet are found to relax those of the mind, and to render all its efforts feeble and impotent.

—Jonathan Swift (1710)<sup>1</sup>

Working with his producer, Denise Robert (and Robert Lantos) and with his writer, J. Jacob Potashnik, Denys Arcand designed *Stardom* as an illustration of Andy Warhol's prediction that in the future everybody would be famous for 15 minutes. Ironically, what was supposed to happen to the star has happened to the film. Although it was considered sufficiently prestigious in 2000 both to close the Cannes Film Festival and to open the Toronto Film Festival, it scarcely migrated at all to any theatre screens. It has had no theatrical release in either the United States or Great Britain and only a repertory release



in English Canada. It immediately became *un film maudit*—a film not fit to exist except in VHS and DVD formats tucked away inside the more enterprising video outlets.

Many of the reviews were negative and, given the absence of release, not numerous. Writing an interview article for *Take One*, Maurie Alioff understood what the film was doing,<sup>2</sup> as did Mark Peranson writing from Cannes for Toronto's *Eye Weekly*.<sup>3</sup> But Elvis Mitchell of the *New York Times* entirely missed the complexities of the film, fulminating that a film so superficial should last only 15 minutes.<sup>4</sup> Even Jonathan Rosenbaum found it so full of contempt that "[s]itting through this barrage of all-purpose insults aimed at obvious targets was an unenlightening chore."<sup>5</sup>

But all film critics are media people, and possibly a film that so savagely attacks media people cannot easily be approached by other media people without relaxing the sinews of their minds, as Jonathan Swift has suggested. If the film is, indeed, informed by contempt (which is questionable), it is a contempt which is itself informed by the conditions of the world in which we live—especially as reflected through the media.

However, *Stardom* is not about its subject matter. It is not just about celebrities or about the insistent triviality of





television sound-bites. Ultimately, I want to argue, the film is about loss—loss of self, loss of centre, of sincerity, and especially of moral purpose. To evoke the language of Roman Catholicism within which Arcand grew up, it is about the absence of grace. The film is, from this point-of-view, a journey through hell.

Arcand's hell is different, however, from any hell imagined by the church. In Arcand's hell, everyone is smiling. Everyone is having a good time—or at least pretending to. *Stardom's* antecedents are less Woody Allen's *Celebrity* (1998) or Robert Altman's *Prête-à-Porter* (1994) than that classic allegory of a search for a meaningful existence, Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), along with, of course, Arcand's own *Jésus de Montréal* (1989).

Artists and intellectuals of Arcand's generation, born in Quebec in the 1930s or 1940s—people like Hubert Aquin, Jacques Godbout, Marie-Claire Blais, Jean Pierre Lefebvre—all grew up within the atmosphere of a most insistent Catholicism, largely Jansenist to boot. Whether directly in spite of themselves or indirectly through the church's many prohibitions, they inhabited a world that was deemed to pos-

sess a moral centre. Furthermore, the proscription of critical intelligence by Roman Catholicism meant that these young people all read the works that were proscribed. Among these were the great existential novels that grew out of the Second World War, which were themselves written in response to the failings of the church—*La Nausée* (1938) by Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Étranger* (1942) by Albert Camus, *La Condition humaine* (1946) by André Malraux, *Il Conformista* (1951) by Alberto Moravia. All these works (and there were others) addressed the moral bases of behaviour. God may have died, killed off by Nietzsche, by the war, and by the complicity of the church; but this death generated a search for a value system that would replace the Christian inheritance, whether through the social collectivity of communism (Sartre, for a time, and the poet Paul Éluard) or of individual responsibility (Camus, Malraux, Moravia).

This degree of moral thoughtfulness has slipped out of the world. It has been replaced by a gleeful consumerism and an individualized hedonism. These attitudes in turn are the result of a pampered insouciance on the part of industrialized nations, heedless of problems in the rest of the world.

Although I believe this background does, in part, explain





the satiric edge of Denys Arcand, there are other factors. One of them is politics, about which more later; but another is intelligence—intelligence informed by idealism. The world of Jonathan Swift was not affected by loss of faith but his satire is as savage as Arcand's at the failure of human nature to achieve its full potential.

Writing in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Swift belonged to a satiric age. In *The Dunciad* (1728-9), Alexander Pope with comparable authority railed at the foolishness of mankind, especially of scribes—i.e., of media people. But no one has matched the supremacy of Swift. Another short example:

There is a brain that will endure but one scumming; let the owner gather it with discretion, and manage his little stock with husbandry; but, of all things, let him beware of bringing it under the lash of his betters, because that will make it all bubble up into impertinence, and he will find no new supply. Wit, without knowledge, being a sort of cream, which gathers in a night to the top, and, by a skilful hand, may be soon whipped into froth; but, once scummed away, what appears underneath will be fit for nothing but to be thrown to the hogs.<sup>6</sup>

Swift's work is exhilarating because his misanthropy is counterbalanced by an extraordinarily creative use of language which is in turn evidence of an exceptional intelligence. I want to make a similar case for Denys Arcand.

\*

Whatever its limitations (and there are a few), the formal distinction of *Stardom* resides in its refusal to establish a settled point-of-view. As George M. Wilson might explain the situation, *Stardom's* narrative strategies decline the security of "epistemic authority."<sup>7</sup> In nearly all the scenes in the film, we are never sure about what we might infer from what we are looking at.

The film opens simply enough, establishing what we can recognize as conventional cinematic time. A long-shot of a winterscape reveals an outdoor rink in Cornwall, Ontario. We see Tina/Jessica Paré in a car with her mother and sister. Evidently she is crying about the disapproval of her father. As a hockey player, he had found her, as her sister explains, "not fast enough, too afraid to get into the corners. You're a wimp. That's all he ever said."

Tina stops whimpering, collects her gear from the trunk of the car, and marches off towards the rink. As the credits appear and the girls skate out onto the ice to the triumphant celebrations of the music of Verdi,<sup>8</sup> a sports photographer captures Tina's image in a desultory backwards glance. A few moments later, after she walks past the community television camera, Arcand's camera zooms in on the lens of the camera and from that moment on, at least until the final sequence, everything we experience is mediated through television. As scenes shift in rapid succession from news clips, talk shows, MTV convulsions to the more intimate black-&-white images by renowned video artist, Bruce Taylor/Robert Lepage, the "epistemic distance" between spectator and spectacle keeps changing and—the *real* problem for most viewers—the lovely Tina, our protagonist, the "star" of the film is held at a distance. Divorced from conventional cinematic time, she becomes unknowable. Like the men in her life who are driven mad less by the reality of her than by her image, we can only know her through a shifting series of televisual representations.



As in the works of Jonathan Swift, the searing satire spares no one. From the two do-dos of the local Lion's Club who when making a video to celebrate Tina's success at winning their Annual Athletic Achievement Award forgot to turn on the sound, passing by way of a probable allusion to Naomi Wolf—the beautiful feminist—to an implicit reference to Jana Sterbak's more outlandish creations in the "Shit" installation that we see towards the end of the film, Arcand's satiric searchlight irradiates them all. In fact, one of the pleasures of the film arises from the joy of spotting the programs alluded to. There are virtually libellous evocations of Oprah and Jerry Springer and the spastic veejays of music video; but Front Page Challenge also gets a drubbing as do the unctuous fund-drives for public television. Perhaps the most hilarious is a French talk show in the style of "Bouillion de Culture" in which the male intellectuals all but ignore their anglophone female guest and end up arguing furiously with one another.

Throughout all these televisual representations, Tina is constantly questioned but never allowed to reply. She is just an image, signifying beauty, achieving momentary fame, but basically a catalyst for other people's fantasies.



Most representative is Susie Tucker/Lisa Bronwyn Moore, the gushing "Fashion One" television host who always assumes an excitement at the success of her stars although the excitement is entirely her own. While Tina does move from an uncomprehending passivity to an acquired confidence in her own success, in so many scenes—another problem for spectators!—she is without psychology. She appears as if absent from herself.

The men who try to claim her—Philippe Gascon/Charles Berling; Barry Levine/Dan Aykroyd; Blaine de Castillon/Frank Langella—mostly want to tell her what to do. The exception is Barry. He is a successful restaurateur in Montreal whose fashionable eating place, Italasia, combines the cuisines of Italy and Japan! In what is for Dan Aykroyd unquestionably the most accomplished performance of his career, the middle-aged, balding Barry leaves his wife and children and his Montreal success to follow Tina to New York where begins his slow decline. Barry adores Tina in a rather avuncular way and, unlike the others, makes few demands on her. He is content to watch her enjoying her life with others as, increasingly, he fills himself with scotch. Finally he snaps and, after attacking her, is dragged off to prison—a totally destroyed and humiliated

man. In this film supposedly about Tina, about *her* stardom, disconcertingly these scenes with Barry provide the compassionate centre of the film.

The epistemological ground has shifted. From whose point-of-view do we witness this decline? Certainly not Tina's, who is generally off in the distance, scarcely aware of where she is, doing her modelling thing, with people snapping photographs all around her. Often Barry is talking to Bruce's video diary of Tina's life; once he is on a sympathetic television show called "Life with a star." But constantly he moves us. As if in a regular, old-fashioned film, he seems real. His pain is palpable. But with Tina, because she is almost totally presented as an image, we can rarely know what she is feeling—if anything.

Another disorientating moment concerns the meeting, on the Oprah look-alike show, of Tina with her father, Merik Menzhal/Nicu Branzea, who had deserted his family a few years ago. Evidently a drunk and an abusive father, he explains on the "Oprah" show that "sometimes you have to move on." He had escaped through the Iron Curtain as a promising hockey star but his career hadn't worked out for him in North America.

Whatever kind of failure he might have been, there is a desperation in his features which, again, cannot help but affect us. Tina, on the other hand, simply expresses anger, finally screaming out "Fuck you!" on television. Afterwards, talking to Bruce's video camera, Merik further explains how in Soviet Czechoslovakia he had witnessed half his family slaughtered and the other half shipped away to camps. Assuming he is telling the truth—not a necessary assumption—he has obviously endured more pain than the little Ontario family he deserted. Finally, he explains to Bruce that the "Oprah" show offered him \$2,400.00 to appear, along with travel expenses—an offer he couldn't refuse.

What are we looking at when we are watching these scenes? What can we know? Where is the epistemic authority that would re-assure us that the images are authentic, that the characters have at some level a relationship with one another? Detractors of the film might claim this as the problem: the film is incoherent. I am arguing, however, that this incoherence is deliberate, that this unreliable narration is part and parcel of the formal achievement of the film. As George Wilson has suggested:

Failure to allow for unreliable narration is really a symptom of a much broader problem. It represents a general failure to take into account that epistemic authority is a variable matter and that the variations are important.<sup>9</sup>

The variations contest the authority, not only of all the televisual representations in *Stardom* but also, finally, of Arcand's own film. While Arcand would not formulate his project in such a way—in fact, he would laugh at such a formulation—in this postmodern world of uncertain values dominated by a devouring opportunism, there can be no certainties at the moment whether in life or art. Especially in North America where there has never been much of an active class struggle and so little possibility for militant social change, one can either go mad with despair or one can laugh. As Arcand once explained:

I always had difficulties with militants. They are always extremely serious people; one should not make light of their cause. Unfortunately for me I love to laugh...Laughter has a



diabolical ring, it is a fundamental rejection of the human condition. It exposes all those who have a pretty high opinion of themselves, and God knows there are a lot of them!<sup>10</sup>

\*

A cynical, satirical view of the world is often an attitude that one grows into, generally as the result of failed hopes and dreams. Many of the Québécois of Arcand's generation transferred the imposed idealism of religion onto the political idealism of a sovereign Quebec, especially after the Parti Québécois was founded in 1968.

But this switch is only partly true for Arcand. Although a political intelligence animates his first adventures in filmmaking—his controversial National Film Board documentary, *On est au coton* (1970),<sup>11</sup> his first three fiction features, *La maudite galette* (1971), *Réjeanne Padovani* (1973), *Gina* (1975) and, supremely, his most explicit statement of political disillusionment, *Le Confort et l'indifférence* (1982)—his concerns were never exclusively political. In his early fictional features he seems to have been equally concerned with corruption. In fact, although Jonathan Rosenbaum might complain of Arcand's "contempt" and others have spoken about his cynicism, I believe it a mistake to attribute these qualities to the filmmaker. If they exist at all, they belong less to the man than to the films.

Trained as an historian in Montreal in the 1950s, deeply affected by the cultural pessimism of Maurice Séguin and yet exposed to the more affirmative accounts of Michel Brunet and other historians at the Université de Montréal, Arcand has always brought an analytical distance to everything he does.<sup>12</sup> Wyndham Wise cites a *Cinema Canada* interview:

I can't bear people who don't want to see what appears, to me, to be reality. I don't know why. I've always been that way...it seems to me that the first attribute of humanity is intelligence.<sup>13</sup>

Jonathan Swift would agree. Stupidity, hypocrisy, and—especially in *Stardom*—inauthenticity are the primary targets of the films of Denys Arcand. In this way his work resembles, as Wyndham Wise has suggested, that of Luis Buñuel.<sup>14</sup>

Within the world of this film, Renny Ohayon/Thomas Gibson, Tina's agent for World Creative Management, is the devil. He is always cool, never sincere—the master of spin. He'll say anything that seems effective for any particular scrum. He is completely up front about his tax evasion schemes; and when it is appropriate to say so, he will claim that "Tina has native blood."

At the same time, he is above the fray. Appreciative of Tina, even affectionate with her, he doesn't succumb to the temptations of her beauty. He has been there before. Tina is just another client, another piece of merchandise that it is his job to nurture and protect.

Possibly the real devil (and ultimate pornographer) in the film is the photographer, Philippe Gascon—the man who first successfully markets Tina's image and, for a time, receives her favours. Perhaps immature (but no more so than Picasso, he modestly explains), there is a kind of creepy honesty in many of his declarations. At one moment, while driving his beautiful convertible, he delivers a monologue on beauty, on his addiction to it, on how he trembles in the presence of it—like Matisse trembling in anticipation when hearing the footsteps of a new model coming up to his atelier. "That's the way I am," Philippe declares. "I'm not gonna change."

Even while finding them funny, spectators may disapprove of





these statements and certainly disapprove of Philippe's declared hierarchy of human creativity, with homosexual men at the top and heterosexual woman at the bottom; but his celebration of beauty is re-inforced by a pompous academic, citing Plato and Freud to say much the same thing, and—indeed, in interviews—by Arcand himself:

I was always mesmerized by the power of beauty. Ever since I was about 10 years old, a beautiful woman could make me do absolutely anything. I would lose just about any kind of control I'd have over myself. It's just an awesome power. ... It's now less severe than it used to be because I'm older and I'm wiser, but I've always questioned myself as to why it was so powerful<sup>15</sup>

Where do we stand, then, in relation to this male celebration of female beauty? What kind of irony may we enjoy during these moments in the film when we know that Arcand thinks in much the same way?

The third substantial male that tries to trap Tina is the Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations, Blaine de Castillon. Perhaps because de Castillon is culturally the most powerful man in the film and also the oldest, in Tina's scenes with him, she begins to rebel. Repeatedly, the cause of her rebellion is the ubiquitous presence of Bruce, gate-crashing events, even their wedding, always with her complicity, pursuing his video record of her life.

There is a wonderfully self-reflexive scene in which we see Tina in her boudoir, getting ready for her wedding, perfectly at ease with Bruce videotaping her as she dresses.

He is trying to talk her out of the marriage, explaining that she will simply be a trophy wife. She defends herself valiantly (although we scarcely believe her), explaining that she enjoys the life style of an ambassador's wife. If we are still trying to follow this film at the level of personal motivation (generally a frustrating endeavour), these scenes may register the psychological moment when she begins to assert herself.



Although Tina does gain confidence during these scenes with de Castillon which also register the final days of her career as a model, throughout the film Tina less speaks than is spoken for—even, as we shall see, at the end. This silent quality allows her to be the recipient of the projected fantasies of all the other characters in the film but also of the audience.

With its kaleidoscopic vitality, *Stardom*, finally, is a film without a centre. Or more accurately: it is a film in which the main





character seems absent from herself. This is why I claim that the film is about loss—loss of moral centre, loss of a fully self-determining, existential self.



But Tina is not a victim. Unlike her hockey playing days, as a model she has not been “afraid to get into the corners.” She has not been a wimp. In her modelling life, in her affairs with men, she acquires the courage she lacked in hockey. She has demonstrated that she is capable of breaking jaws and flattening noses. In this way, the film inverts the generic studies of the tragic fate of stars. Unlike *Darling* (1965), *Puzzle of a Downfall Child* (1970), *Death of a Centerfold: The Dorothy Stratten Story* (1981), *Star 80* (1983), or *Gia* (1998), *Stardom* is not a tragedy. As Arcand has explained:

We’re talking about models and agents. The only possible film that you can do about this is one with humour. This is a fun story. You’re supposed to laugh at all this.<sup>16</sup>

But as I have argued, it is serious laughter. To paraphrase a line from Marcel Ophüls’s magnificent *Madame de ...* (1953), it is only on the surface that this film is superficial. As Mark Peranson phrased it, acknowledging its intricate structure, “never has a film about superficiality been so complex.”<sup>17</sup> There is more to *Stardom* than meets the eye!

\*

The idea of surface is explicitly addressed in the film, possibly valorized. In a television interview, Bruce is asked if he is covering Tina’s life in order to show up the superficiality of existence. “Perhaps,” he concedes with a shrug. “You’ve got to remember that superficiality never killed anybody,” he explains. “I’d take Andy Warhol any day over Lenin, Heidegger, or Pol Pot. You name it. You may think that Calvin Klein is shallow but the guy never bombed Cambodia.”

This discussion of superficiality relates directly to Merik’s story and to recurring scenes of political violence. Twice in the film, Muslim terrorists are referred to—once through a bombing in the streets of Paris, the other involving a television report of hundreds of people dead in Algeria, only to be wiped off the screen by the obviously more important news item that supermodel Tina Menzhal is in hospital, having been attacked by the haplessly unhappy Barry Levine.

These scenes are simultaneously funny and disturbing. They suggest the world that our consumer society neglects—increasingly, many of us might feel, to our peril. Like the

scenes of war that are interwoven with the dinner parties in Buñuel’s *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972), the scenes of violence in *Stardom* invoke an angry world that our pampered lives ignore.<sup>18</sup>

In their introduction to an anthology on the work of Denys Arcand, André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy point out that within the narrative structures of his films, Arcand uses “parallelism to expose contradictions and similarities, but never carries the dynamic through to a unifying resolution;”<sup>19</sup> and Gene Walz has suggested that Arcand’s “is a cinema of radical incompatibilities.”<sup>20</sup> The scenes of violence run parallel to the scenes of superficial success, as do the scenes of Tina’s three major lovers being carried off to prison or, in the case of de Castillon, perhaps to a psychiatric ward. Arcand puts them side by side as part of our world. He doesn’t link them with any implication of causality. This refusal of closure, the courage of open-endedness, is one of the reasons that Arcand’s films are so rich. As with the work of Jean-Luc Godard, there is so much space provided within these parallel structures for interpretative play on the part of the audience.

As if to please us—to hint at closure—*Stardom* nudges us towards a happy ending. But I wonder. How happy is it? How can we know?

As her career is winding down, Tina returns to Cornwall and to athletics to confer a prize on the winner of the local marathon—a solid hunk of a guy who is a doctor at the local hospital. Winterscapes follow, returning us to the opening images of the film. Still through a televisual representation, we see the doctor standing beside Tina, now his substantially pregnant wife, complaining about the inadequate snow clearance in the region. This time Arcand’s camera zooms out from the television camera that is recording them and, at last, we are back in conventional cinematic time. Or are we?

We witness Tina in a close two-shot adoringly gazing at her hubby as he explains that he will be on call all night.



We then cut to a long-shot of the pregnant Tina outside her model home, the image (has it been digitally enhanced?) looking more like a Hallmark Christmas card than the genuine pastoral winterscapes that often frame Arcand’s films.<sup>21</sup> To the hesitant sounds of a piano playing a transcription of the Verdi chorus that opened the film, now with all sense of triumphant celebration eliminated, she steps inside and approaches a window. She looks outside and then, still in total silence with a Mona Lisa smile on her face, she looks directly at us. The screen fades, and the closing credits roll over the (ironic?)



strains of Ella Fitzgerald singing the Borney Bergantine/Betty Peterson standard, "My Happiness:"

Whether skies are gray or blue  
Any place on earth will do  
Just as long as I'm with you,  
My happiness.<sup>22</sup>



What does this concluding gaze followed by Betty Peterson's words say about Tina's character? What does it say about her place in the film? Has she, like Mytyl/Shirley Temple in *The Blue Bird* (1940) or Dorothy/Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) found her blue bird of happiness in her own backyard? Or is she more like the little Umbrian angel that ends *La Dolce Vita*, looking out at us as if to enquire if there is any place for her in the world?

Like Tina, in *La Dolce Vita* Marcello/Marcello Mastroianni wanders through a whole range of experiences available to him in contemporary Italy, not silently but passively—incapable of taking a stand. He is unable to find sustenance in the world he inhabits. Initially meeting the Umbrian angel in a café, he encounters her again at the end, across an inlet by the sea. She is speaking to him, gesturing to him; but he cannot hear her. He cannot understand. He gets up and, with a shrug, walks away, leaving her to look out of the frame at the spectators, like Tina looks out at us.

Perhaps I do protest too much. Perhaps Luc Perreault was more on the mark when he wrote, quite simply, that "the true Rosebud of Tina will remain forever unknown."<sup>23</sup> However, what I am trying to suggest is that, if we wanted to, we could take this film far more seriously than most people have had the patience to. And I haven't even mentioned the stylistically bravura sequences such as the montage of the fashion show in New York, with close-ups of the models' faces intercut with long-shots of shimmering silhouettes and pixilated movement—the whole sequence accompanied by the "Hunting Chorus" from *Der Freischütz* by Carl Maria von Weber in which the men sing out their manly joy at hunting down their prey!

Even if we might agree with Jason Anderson that "[s]ome of the comedy is overly broad"<sup>24</sup> and, owing to the repetitiousness of all the idiotic media personalities, we might feel at times that the film is a little less than the sum of its parts, on reflection we might also recognize that *Stardom* is a film of great intelligence about contradiction and absence—possibly, even at the end.

In cinema as in literature, point-of-view—a received sense of a reliable narrative present—allows us to infer meaning from a film. In *Stardom*, Arcand denies us any such easy inference. We must establish our own relationship with all the disparate elements, whether we find them funny or banal, superficial or profound, contemptuous or insightful.

Although not as urbane witty as *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* or as humanely balanced as *Jésus de Montréal*, *Stardom* exhibits one of the most innovative narratives in the history of cinema, contesting the established conventions of epistemic authority and of narrative reliability.

A film without a centre, *Stardom* enacts the loss of a confident self that many people experience today through the shifting fragmentation of the world. *Stardom* is about beauty, about television, about celebrities and about the animated absurdities of the contemporary world; but it is also about a felt sense of loss. In this way, even while we are laughing at it, even if we refuse it or find it shallow, it is also about ourselves.

**Peter Harcourt** is the author of *A Canadian Journey: Conversations with Time* (1994). He currently lives in Ottawa and worries about Canada.

## Notes

- Jonathan Swift, "The Preface of the Author," *A Full and True Account of the Battle Fought last Friday Between the Ancient and the Modern Books in St. James's Library*, (London, 1710). *Gulliver's Travels, A Tale of the Tub, and The Battle of the Books* (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), 518
- Maurie Alioff, "Media Mania and the Beauty of Beauty," *Take One* (Vol 9, No 29), Fall 2000, 8-12
- Mark Peranson, "Arcand ponders beauty's trap." <[http://www.eyenet.net/eye/issue/issue\\_08.31.00/film/arcand.html](http://www.eyenet.net/eye/issue/issue_08.31.00/film/arcand.html)>.
- Elvis Mitchell, "'Stardom': A Star Is Borne Aloft to a Make-Believe Heaven." <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/27/arts/27STAR.html>>
- Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Stardom." *The Chicago Reader* (2003) <[http://65.201.198.41/movies/capsules/19641\\_STARDOM.html](http://65.201.198.41/movies/capsules/19641_STARDOM.html)>
- Swift, 518
- George M. Wilson, *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View*. (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 5
- The music is the "Drinking Song" from *La Traviata*, adapted by André Rieu
- Wilson, 73
- Cited in Pierre Véronneau, "Alone and with others: Denys Arcand's destiny within Quebec cinematic and cultural context." André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy (eds), *Auteur/Provocateur: The Films of Denys Arcand*. (Westport: Praeger, 1995)
- On est au coton* was so controversial in its politics that for six years the Film Board refused to release the film.
- See Arcand's homage to Maurice Séguin cited in Réal La Rochelle, "Sound design and music as *tragédie en musique*: the documentary practice of Denys Arcand." Loiselle and McIlroy, 41
- Wyndham Wise (ed.), *Take One's Essential Guide To Canadian Film*. (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 11. From Michael Dorland, "Denys Arcand's *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*." *Cinema Canada* 134, October 1986, 20
- Ibid, 12
- "Production," from the *Stardom* web site <<http://www.stardomthe-movie.com>>
- Ibid
- Peranson
- In an interview with André Loiselle, Arcand has expressed a special admiration for Buñuel. "I only know where I come from, not where I'm going": a conversation with Denys Arcand." Loiselle and McIlroy, 137
- André Loiselle and Brian McIlroy, "Introduction." Loiselle and McIlroy, 2
- Gene Walz, "A cinema of radical incompatibilities: Arcand's early fiction films." Loiselle and McIlroy, 54
- The winterscapes such as we see in both *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* (1986) and *Jésus de Montréal* (1989) are shot by Jacques Leduc, himself the director of "pastoral" films such as *Tendresse ordinaire* (1973)
- The fact that this song has been heard before when Tina was in Paris with Renny, drinking champagne on a bateau-mouche in the Canal St. Martin, might imply that for Tina, happiness is a moveable feast.
- "Luc Perreault, 'Soi belle et tais-toi.'" *La Presse*, 28 October 2000.
- Jason Anderson, "Shooting Stars." <[http://www.eyenet.net/eye/issue/issue\\_10.26.00/film/stardom.html](http://www.eyenet.net/eye/issue/issue_10.26.00/film/stardom.html)>



# Quebec's Next Generation

## FROM LAUZON TO TURPIN

by George Melnyk

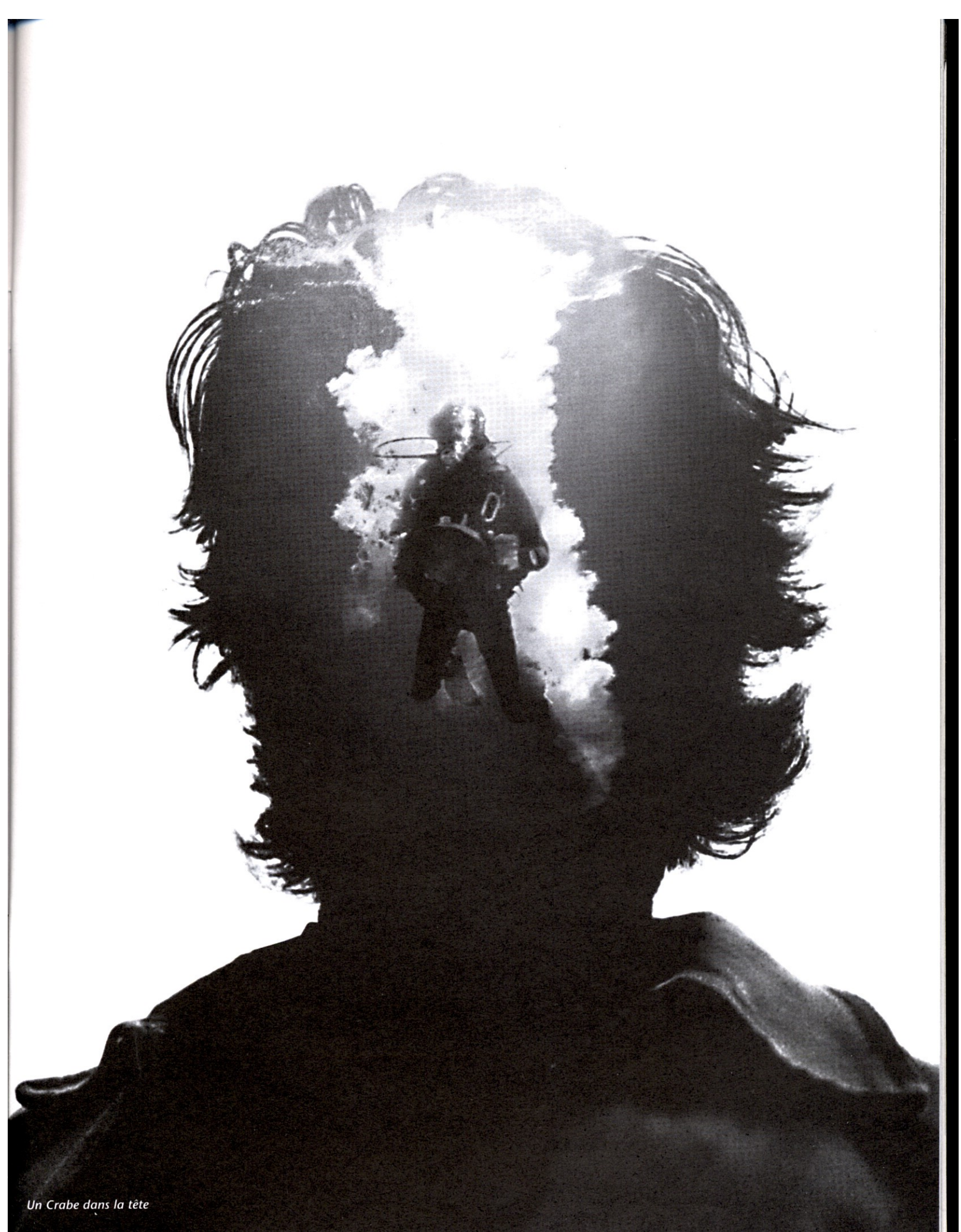
Quebec's new wave of feature filmmakers from the mid-sixties climaxed with Arcand's masterful portrayal of the new Quebec in *Déclin de l'empire américain* (1986). Their achievement encouraged a new generation of directors that had not grown up in the Duplessis era, but rather in the reformed world of the Quiet Revolution and the sovereignty-oriented rhetoric of the separatist Parti Québécois. After sixteen years of modernizing Liberal rule (1960-1976) and a decade of Parti Québécois transformation, Quebec was assured in its francophone identity and its distinctness. The reactionary Duplessis era that formed the youthful world of Claude Jutra and Denys Arcand was as far away as Paris was from Montreal. The new generation spoke differently.

Yet there was a line of continuity, a reality that flowed from that Duplessis period to the two subsequent political epochs that seemed to hold the masterminds of Quebec cinema in a kind of vise. Weren't these film directors interpreting Quebec and wasn't Quebec a society with a history, a symbolic tradition and an iconography that informed its collective consciousness? Claude Lauzon (1953-1997) was the intermediary who created a transition from that early period to the world of the 1990s and beyond. He pointed the way to the power of the new generation represented by Robert Lepage (1958-) Denis Villeneuve (1967-), and André Turpin (1965-), none of whom knew anything else except the secularism of the post-Duplessis world and francophone dominance.

Lauzon was a working class high-school dropout whose father was a laborer with a grade two education. He returned to university where he became an award-winning student filmmaker and was offered \$70,000 to turn his screenplay "Piwi" into a film, which he did in 1982.<sup>1</sup> The film caused a political stir in Quebec because of its sexual violence. His second film, *Un Zoo la nuit* (Night Zoo) won 13 Genies in 1988, the largest number of Genies ever won by a single film. Initially he was unable to get the film funded, but eventually it opened the Director's Fortnight at Cannes. Sadly, Lauzon was to create only one other film, *Léolo* (1992), which was his true masterpiece. He died tragically in 1997 in the crash of the bush plane he was flying in northern Quebec. He was 35 when *Night Zoo* became a sensation and not yet forty when *Léolo* challenged the popular imagination with its incredible imagery and style.

*Un Zoo* was described as "a complete subversion of the Hollywood action flick," winning Best Motion Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Music, Best Editing and Best Actor plus seven other categories at the Genies.<sup>2</sup> The film tells the story of a criminal released from jail who is pursued by corrupt and sadistic cops who want the money he has stashed away. His father is dying and the two men reconnect and then try to pursue their mutual love of hunting and fishing, activities that Lauzon himself pursued with a tragically Hemingwayesque passion. In the end the son steals his dying father from his hospital bed to go to the city zoo to shoot an elephant. The final scene in the film has the son ritually purify his father's naked body by washing it and then







Un Zoo la nuit



Nô



lying down beside it. This scene is meant to balance the opening scene of the movie, in which the son is being raped in prison. During the course of the film the Anglo cop that ordered the rape is dutifully hunted down by his victim.

Bill Marshall, a European scholar of Quebec cinema, has pointed out how *Un Zoo* uses the two male leads (the young man and the old man) to symbolize a continuity between the urban working class and Quebec's rural/pastoral and wilderness past.<sup>3</sup> The theme of continuity is essential to the Lauzon enterprise. As a child Lauzon knew the introspective Quebec world of the 50s and then as an adult he knew the contemporary Quebec world of "cultural globalization and the detraditionalization of identity" and he created a natural bridge between the two worlds.<sup>4</sup> When Montreal film critic Jean Marcel wrote about *Un Zoo* in *Le Devoir*, his article was titled "Un cinéma qui reflète le Québec d'aujourd'hui."<sup>5</sup> This "Quebec of today" was still imbued with its Catholic identity, which is evident in the description of the film offered by *Le Droit*—"Une version moderne de la parabole de l'enfant prodigue"—the Biblical parable of the prodigal son.<sup>6</sup>

After Lauzon's untimely death Jean Marcel wrote a tribute in which he remarked on Lauzon's innate ability to combine in one universe tenderness and violence.<sup>7</sup> The power of *Un Zoo* was such that it had grossed \$1 million in Quebec within 3 months of its release.<sup>8</sup> But in typical Lauzon style the auteur refused a \$100,000 Quebec film prize to fund his next film because of his criticism of how funding was carried out in Quebec. Lauzon was constantly in a battle with Quebec's cultural bureaucracy and, in fact, made his living directing television commercials, which may very well have given him the surrealistic sensibility that frames his masterpiece *Léolo*.

*Léolo* is a difficult film to characterize or to summarize. On one level it is a coming-of-age story of 12-year old Léo Lozeau, a son of a francophone working-class family. Léo keeps a diary in which he insists that his name is Léolo, Italian for Leo. He creates a fantasy world in which his own conception is semi-immaculate (His mother was impregnated by falling on a tomato in a Montreal market. A peasant in Sicily had masturbated on it during its harvesting). Léo lusts after a neighboring Italian girl who prostitutes herself for his grandfather. In revenge Léo tries to murder his grandfather in an amazing scene which the syndicated American film critic Roger Ebert called "one of the most astonishing I have seen."<sup>9</sup> In fact Ebert stated bluntly that





Léolo

"Lauzon's film contains images no other film would dare to show."<sup>10</sup> For example, Léolo's father and mother are obsessed with bowel movements with the father dispensing laxatives weekly in a ritual parody of Holy Communion in order to maintain family health. Léolo's sisters are insane and his body-builder brother lets himself be bullied by the local Anglo thug even though he has the physical power to thrash the fellow. Quebec becomes a universe of mental impotence is Lauzon's biting suggestion.

American critics were enthralled with the film. *Time* magazine named it one of the top ten movies of 1993, claiming that there is "no movie bolder in fashioning domestic tragedy into art."<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile in Canada *Maclean's* magazine ranked it as the number one movie of 1992.<sup>12</sup> Brian D. Johnson's review of the film in *Maclean's* was titled "Rebel Masterpiece."<sup>13</sup> He claimed that the film "elevates Canadian cinema to new heights of creative ambition and achievement" and compared Lauzon to Fellini and Truffaut in their prime.<sup>14</sup> Such exuberant praise was not matched in that year's Genies, where the film won only the original screenplay award for Lauzon because it was Cronenberg's year to be lauded for *Naked Lunch*. Johnson quotes Lauzon as saying:

This is really a movie on the edge. If we hadn't taken the time to film it properly with the right music and ambience, it could have been really crass and ugly."<sup>15</sup>

Scenes with Léolo masturbating with a piece of liver which his brother later eats at dinner or the rape of a cat by a one of a gang of adolescents are both disgusting and yet Lauzon is able to redeem them. One of the key elements in this redemption is the amazing music he chose for the film, including hypnotic Arabic drumming, choral dirges, the throaty blues of Tom Waits and even the Rolling Stones. The film has a strong autobiographical undercurrent (Lauzon began writing the script while attending a film festival in Sicily) with the use of the Lozeau name to parallel Lauzon and the extensive mental illness that characterized Lauzon's own family experience, but it is its political message that is so challenging. Originally Lauzon had tried to get the film done in English but was rebuffed by Norman Jewison, whom he had approached. The film was about Quebec and for Quebec and so belonged in Quebec. Lauzon's attempt to escape the boundaries of his national identity failed. He responded by making the majority of the film in English, the language in which Léolo speaks to himself and to us.



Casting the charismatic Pierre Bourgault, a leading separatist orator and founder of the Rassemblement pour l'indépendance Nationale in the late 1960s and one of Lauzon's professors in university, in the role of a silent reader of Léo's diary (in one scene he walks through a candle-lit sanctuary as if he were some kind of priest reading a sacred text or a breviary) could not but arouse commentary and speculation among Quebec audiences. Bourgault was the most outspoken of early Quebec separatists whose oratory was excessive and passionate. That he should appear mostly silent is not an accident in spite of Lauzon's protestations that the film has no political connotations. And the whole issue of assimilation of immigrants into francophone society is played up in the relationship between Léo and his Italian neighbor, Bianca. One lusts after the unattainable other. There is a strong critique of Quebec's political goals in Lauzon which validates artistic independence. A film in which Quebec's leading separatist is silenced; Léo's muscular brother cowers before an Anglo half his size; most of the francophones are insane; and the film itself is narrated primarily in English cannot but be seen to be an allegory of an identity crisis for a whole nation. Only Léo's nurturing, tolerant and hugely present mother is characterized somewhat sympathetically. She is the non-judgmental source of life that exists beyond politically constructed identities.<sup>16</sup> Marshall describes the film as enunciating Quebec's two most basic myths—the primordial mother and a lost paradise.<sup>17</sup> Unable to take on the dominant society to prove his manhood, Léo can only escape his Quebec mother through a fantasy of paradise, a totally different and "other" identity which becomes an idyllic landscape in the final scene.<sup>18</sup>

That Lauzon did not make another film in the five years before his death was a statement of his alienation from the cinematic world as it existed in Quebec, but it may also have been an expression of a silence that had come about from an auteur's having poured so much of himself into his creation.<sup>19</sup> When one is, in the words of Marcel Jean, "un cinéaste sauvage, qui n'avait pas été domestiqué par le système" one awaits the right, fulfilling and deep moment for the next act of provocation. "I think my work as a director," Lauzon said in an interview in Cannes for the screening of *Léolo*, "is to be able to show our deepest fears."<sup>20</sup> But rather than create horror or revulsion, he would laughingly put those fears within an envelope of preposterous unreality. In this way that which is most threatening is made palatable (such as hanging one's grandfather through an amazing system of ropes and pulleys). *Léolo* is a work of genius whose fruits were subsequently denied audiences by the furies of the genius himself.<sup>21</sup>

Lauzon showed that there were things to say and images to create about Quebec that could surpass a masterpiece like Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* while still articulating basic paradigms. Lauzon proved that not all was said and done about contemporary Quebec and that its ongoing subconscious traumas had come to roost in the street-smart kids of the working class.<sup>22</sup> This was the challenge his work laid before Lepage, Villeneuve and Turpin. Could they surpass the brutal energy and honesty of Lauzon as he had surpassed Arcand?

Lepage was born only four years after Lauzon, but he already belonged to a different world. Although he is officially classified as a "baby boomer" like Lauzon, his sensibility is closer to that of Villeneuve and Turpin than to Lauzon because he did not know "the fifties" that belonged to the old Quebec

and he did not begin making films till the mid-nineties. He was born in a poor family in Quebec City, (again working class roots) which had adopted two English Canadian children. Because of alopecia, an immune disease that caused him to lose all his hair, he had to confront his unusualness at an early age. He found salvation in theatre, a world of adopted identities and masks, where he became a playwright and the director of his own theatre company (Ex Machina), both of which eventually provided him with an international reputation and an entrée into the esoteric world of opera, which he has also directed. After his success as a theatre director and playwright he turned to film. His first film, *Le Confessionnel* dealt with the mysteries of Quebec City, the city he was born in and in which he continues to live.<sup>23</sup>

The film was an international co-production with a budget of \$4 million.<sup>24</sup> Lepage wrote the script with a goal of showing how the past haunts the present.<sup>25</sup> In 1952 Alfred Hitchcock had made a film in Quebec City titled *I Confess*, the story of a priest dealing with the confession of a murderer. Lepage creates fictional scenes about the production of *I Confess* that suggest that a taxi-driver (the father of the main character in the film) who is driving Hitchcock around town is the man who fathered the cousin/brother of the main character in *Le Confessionnel*. Like *I Confess*, *Le Confessionnel* probes the dark secrets that underlie the illusions and false identities that we are offered by family and society and ultimately film itself. This "film-within-a-film" motif was judged by one critic as being "too self-and cross-referential" but it actually gave historic depth to the world of the 1990s. The main metaphor in the film is Quebec City's Pont de Québec, where the brother's mother committed suicide and the main character symbolically carries a young child on his shoulders. It is a "bridging" film in a number of senses.<sup>26</sup> One important "bridge" is the lead, played by the actor Lothaire Bluteau, who also played "Jesus" in Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal*, a film in which Lepage also acted. It is as if Lepage was using the film, through the script he wrote, the locale he chose, and the actors' credits to have his debut film become inextricably bound to the history of film in Quebec. Likewise it is a spanning of generations, a linking of two distant shores (the brothers) into a single paternal unity, and finally, it is a bridge between eras. The film asks how different is the world of 1990s Quebec with its secularism, diversity and sexual tolerance from that of the Duplessis era? Each era lives within its own illusions and separation from the past may very well be the illusion of 1990s Quebec.

*Le Confessionnel* triumphed at the Genies in 1995, winning Best Motion Picture and Best Director and Lepage responded with *Le Polygraphe* the next year. The film was based on Lepage's stage play and explored the difficult nuances of a mysterious murder, inspired in part by Lepage's own knowledge of a real murder case. Again there is a "film-within-a-film" motif in which the auditioning for a part in a film based on a real murder ends up in murder itself. The film was not accorded much recognition. Two years later Lepage rebounded with *Nô*, a comedy about the FLQ crisis of 1970 that received more attention and better reviews. *Take One* termed it a "jaunty follow-up to his dourly Kafkaesque *Le Polygraphe*."<sup>27</sup> The scene is the Osaka World's Fair of 1970, where a Quebec actress is performing a French farce at the Canadian pavilion. On discovering that she is pregnant, she contacts her boyfriend in Quebec, who is part of a farcical FLQ cell. The title of the film comes



from traditional Japanese Nôh theatre with its stylized conventions of dialogue, costuming and staging. The film cost a mere \$1 million, about a quarter of the budget for the previous two Lepage films.<sup>28</sup>

The multi-layered meaning in Nôh drama is reflected in the meaning of the film with its subtle nod toward the 1995 independence referendum and the No/Yes vote. Obviously Lepage preferred the "No" side. In a 1999 interview he argued that Quebec was more than its francophone roots.<sup>29</sup> A film like *Nô* would appeal to the anti-sovereignty crowd and to Anglophone Canada because it made fun of separatism. One Toronto film magazine called it "wickedly hilarious."<sup>30</sup> An article in the Anglophone daily *Montreal Gazette* concluded that Lepage had made *Le Confessionnel* for the producers because it was so well-received, *Le Polygraphe* for the critics because it was so difficult and *Nô* for the people because it was a comedy and popular.<sup>31</sup>

It was inevitable that Lepage's lifestyle as an international jet-setting playwright and stage director and his desire to make Quebec's culture expansive and extroverted would lead to his making an English-language feature.<sup>32</sup> Arcand had tried this in the mid- nineties with his failed *Love and Human Remains*, a film version of a gritty urban play by Alberta's bad-boy playwright Brad Fraser. Lepage did much better with *Possible Worlds* (2000). He adapted a play by John Mighton, whose plot "verges on the indescribable."<sup>33</sup>

The main character lives simultaneously in a variety of parallel universes. He remains the same but the universes change as he appears in one and then the other and returns to previous ones. The continuity in this strange world is provided by the woman he loves who herself appears in different roles and

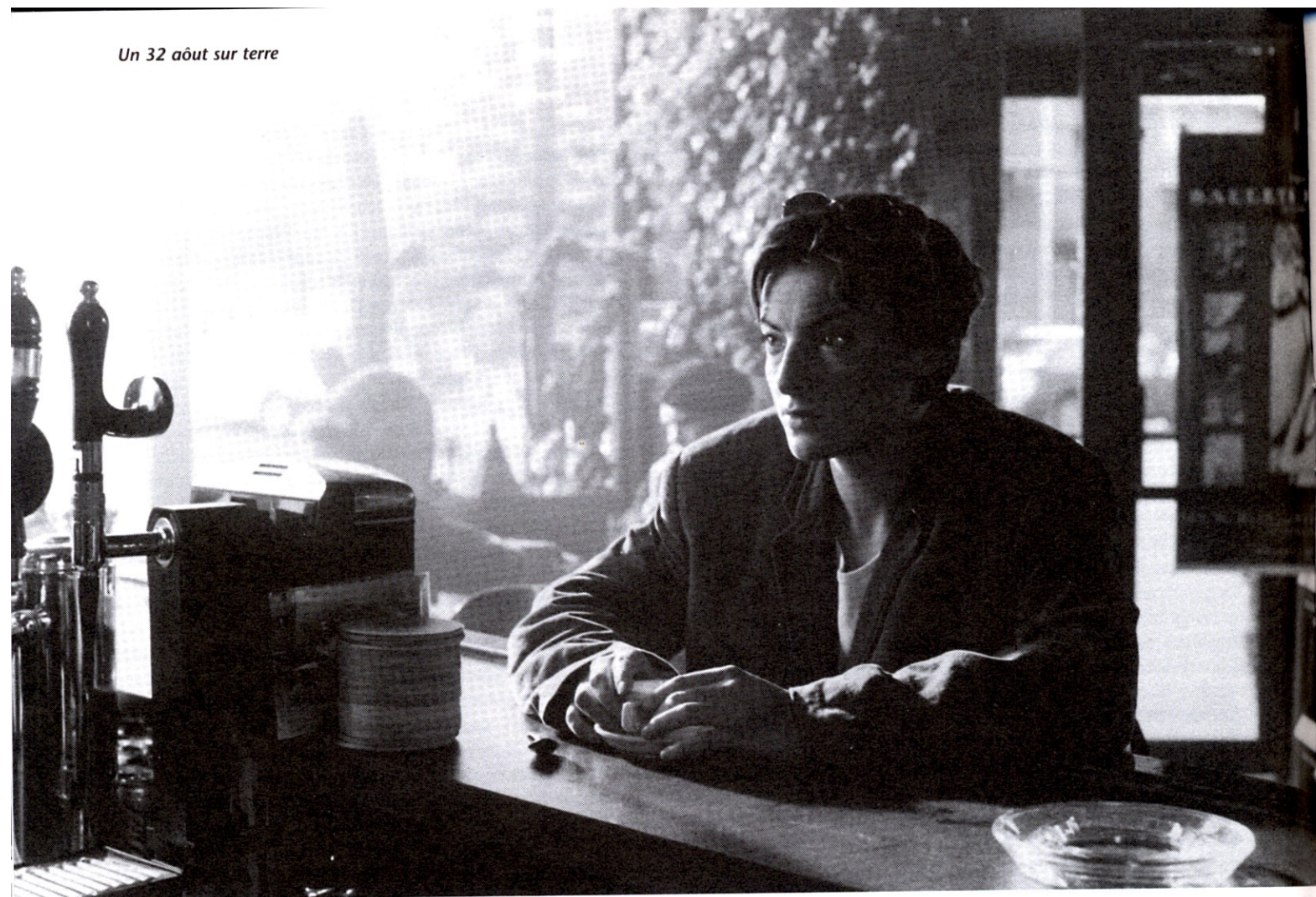
identities. This bizarre narrative is framed by an investigation into his murder and the theft of his brain. Part science fiction, part philosophical treatise, part *policier* (the investigating cop played by Sean McCann steals the show), *Possible Worlds* is equally confusing and enthralling. The independent American murder-thriller, *Memento* (2001) which succeeds in the difficult task of narrating its chronological events linearly but in reverse comes closest to the spirit of *Possible Worlds*.

Lepage's directorial versatility and his prolific creativity in stage and screen has made him a Quebec *wunderkind*. With *Le Confessionnel* he mirrored his own birth family, its bilingual taxi driver father and adopted siblings, and his own sexual orientation, while in *Possible Worlds* he reached toward his own multiplicity of identities, which the film suggests infects us all. The working title of his next film is *Tourism*, a story about organ trafficking. Although Lepage has his share of critics, the abundance of his dramatic and cinematic work over the past two decades (his theatre career began in 1985) is indicative of a major talent.<sup>34</sup> Making four features in six years sets him apart from anyone else of the new generation.

The next most prolific director is Denis Villeneuve (1967-) who has made two feature films—*Un 32 août sur terre* (August 32nd on Earth) in 1998 and *Maelström* in 2000. The first film never received commercial theatrical release in either English Canada or the U.S even though most of the film is set in an American desert.<sup>35</sup> A young model has a car accident, which results in her deciding to change her life by having a baby. She turns to her friend to fulfill her wish. The two characters basically fill the screen with their light-hearted yet edgy story. *Take One* termed it "an existential road movie with a Generation X relationship."<sup>36</sup> Although it had a typical undercurrent of anx-







iety over life's aimlessness and defeats that has come to be a hallmark of Generation X sensibility, it also seemed to echo the introspective universe of the 1960s generation of Quebec filmmakers who began their careers with then popular New Wave introspection about the lives of the young and urbane. In fact Villeneuve, who was just 30 when he made the film, referred to the film as encapsulating "the French New Wave's liberty, freedom and breath."<sup>37</sup> But the mood of the new generation's films is a more playful self-parody in which youthful intensity meets real life superficiality to produce a nervous laughter. The rather curious but understandable marriage of early 60s sensibility with that of the late 1990s represented the repetition of generational concerns. The Quebec filmmaker coming into his own in the late 1990s was seeking self-expression that reflected freedom from the achievements of the previous generation and what better place to find it than in the very personal and quixotic.

Although *Un 32 août sur terre* was screened at Cannes and was Canada's official entry for that year's Academy Awards, it was Villeneuve's second feature, *Maelström* that marked his inauguration into celebrity status. The film won the Best Canadian Film Award at the Montreal World Film Festival. The film is best known for its narrator—a talking fish whose head is chopped off repeatedly throughout the film. Again the lead is a young woman. This time she is a disillusioned boutique owner who has recently had an abortion (graphic opening scene) and like the previous film has an accident which changes her life. She strikes a middle-aged working class man

while driving. He dies soon afterward and the woman enters a journey of self-understanding and healing involving the man's son. The father was a fishmonger, whose job it was to kill fish, ergo the irony of the narrating fish. We see the world from an underwater perspective. If the singular metaphor of the desert framed the first film, then its opposite, the ocean, is the key one in the second. One American reviewer judged the film as tending toward "David Lynch's brand of bizarre cinema."<sup>38</sup> Another American review played on the fish pun in its title "Quirky 'Maelstrom' Ultimately Flounders."<sup>39</sup>

If American reviewers found the film bizarre, the Canadian film establishment was captivated. The film won Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay and Best Cinematography at the Genies in 2001.<sup>40</sup> Admittedly Villeneuve is considered to have an "oddball style...reflecting the angst of a generation" but the awards were a recognition that Quebec continued to set the standard for alluring imagery, innovative narratives, and introspective characterization.<sup>41</sup> In an interview after the release of *Maelström* Villeneuve indicated that whether he liked it or not his films tended to be more and more European.<sup>42</sup> The fish, the ocean, the immigrant fishmonger who dies and his Norwegian oceanographer son are all echoes of Europe and the fishery that first brought Europeans to North America. But the ocean is more than a historical or even an aesthetic concept; the ocean is the source of life itself, which harks back to the abortion image that launches the film.<sup>43</sup>

Villeneuve's work is still too limited in quantity and it is too early in his career to be making any definitive judgment or



interpretation. Nevertheless it is obvious that he is a major auteur talent who has the backing of Quebec's leading producer, Roger Frappier of Max Films. Villeneuve sees himself as part of a new generation. "J'aime travailler avec des réalisateurs de mon âge" he said.<sup>44</sup> His closest collaborator is André Turpin (1965-), who was the cinematographer on *Maelström*, as well as *Un 32 août sur terre*. Friends as well as collaborators, the two filmmakers are often viewed as expressing a youthful Montreal milieu and the "loft-dwelling, latte-guzzling people they know best."<sup>45</sup>

Turpin's feature, *Un crabe dans la tête* (a crab in the head) came out in 2001 and was titled "Soft Shell Man" in English. Turpin wrote, directed and filmed the movie and so appropriately won Quebec's Jutra award in 2002 for Best Screenplay, Best Director and Best Cinematography. It is the story of a 30-year old underwater photographer who lives life on the surface as it were, lying about everything and interested most of all in seducing women. Turpin says the story begins with himself who "was one of these compulsive charmers who couldn't say no."<sup>46</sup> Already lauded for his cinematography in other films, Turpin was able to use this extraordinary talent to make a visually appealing film on a budget of only \$400,000.<sup>47</sup> In an interview about *Un crabe* Turpin admitted that he was getting tired of the kind of films he and Villeneuve had been making about his generation and that he expected they would move beyond what the interviewer called "the generational identity slot."<sup>48</sup>

Of course Lauzon, Lepage, Villeneuve and Turpin do not exhaust the new directorial talent pool in Quebec cinema. Among the contenders are Louis Bélanger with his 1999 film *Post Mortem* and Catherine Martin with *Mariages* (2001). Both are first features. Writer/director Bélanger won the Jutra for best first feature and then the Best Screenplay at the Genies. But these serious filmmakers are very much part of the art house cinema circuit and its confines. In contrast Quebeckers flock to clichéd comedies such as *Les Boys* (1998) and *Les Boys 2* (1999) and *Les Boys 3* (2001) with low-level locker and bar room humour. The first two films in the series grossed over \$11 million in box-office sales in Quebec entitling them to the Golden Reel Award, which goes to the highest box-office grossing Canadian film of the year.<sup>49</sup> Then there are action films like Mico Jetté's *Hochelaga* (2000) about Montreal's motorcycle gang wars. This diversity of genres indicates an industry that continues to generate everything from schlock to high art. For some it creates profit; for others it builds reputations, and for film critics and historians it generates a steady stream of products requiring commentary and analysis.

The existence of a Quebec national cinema is more than simply confirmed by the new generation of filmmakers; it is refreshed and re-animated through their cinematic quests to overcome tradition. It is this struggle that Bill Marshall recognized when he lauded recent Quebec cinema for its "pluralizing, anti-hegemonic potential."<sup>50</sup> The next generation, beginning with Lauzon's critique of Quebec's francophone identity, continues to move toward a multicultural universe, that mysterious rainbow rising over the horizon of a new citizenship.

**George Melnyk** teaches Canadian Studies at the University of Calgary. His book *Pass the Popcorn: A Century of Canadian and Quebec Cinema* will be published by the University of Toronto Press in Spring 2004.

## Notes

- 1 José Arroyo, "Howls from the Asphalt Jungle" *Cinema Canada* No.141 May 1987 p.7
- 2 Katherine Monk, *Weird Sex and Snowshoes and other Canadian Film Phenomenon* (Vancouver: Raincoast, 2001) p.321.
- 3 Bill Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) p.114.
- 4 Ibid. p.115.
- 5 *Le Devoir*, June 7, 1987, p. C4.
- 6 *Le Droit* Sept.12, 1987 p.5.
- 7 Jean Marcel, "Jean-Claude Lauzon" *24 images* No.90, 1998, p.21
- 8 *Cinema Canada* No. 147 November, 1987, p.
- 9 Roger Ebert, "Leolo" *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 9, 1993.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 *Time* Vol.143, no.1, Jan.3, 1994, p.70.
- 12 *Maclean's* Jan.11, 1993, Vol.106, No. 2, p.5.
- 13 *Maclean's* Vol.105, No.21, p.51.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid. p.52.
- 16 For a discussion of national identity in Quebec see Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema*, pp.8-15 in which he reviews recent scholarship on the concept of national identity, particularly in cinema.
- 17 Ibid. p.5
- 18 Marshall makes reference to Freud's 1909 essay "On Sexuality" which discusses how a child seeks a nobler birth once it discovers the reality of parental failings. p.104.
- 19 Marshall indicates that in 1997 the audience share of Quebec films in Quebec was a mere 3.7 percent and that there were usually only ten features made annually with 30% of financing coming from one form or another of state support. (*Quebec National Cinema* pp.15-17.)
- 20 Maurie Alioff, "Childhood Memories" *Take One* Vol.1 No.4 1992 p.18.
- 21 Marcel, "Jean-Claude Lauzon" *24 images* p.21.
- 22 In the Alioff interview "Childhood Memories" Lauzon is quoted as saying "All my relationships were with crooks. Eight people who were close to me then had been shot or stabbed and they're dead."
- 23 Taras Grescoe, *Sacré Blues: An Unsentimental Journey Through Quebec* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 2000) pp.161-162.
- 24 Brian D. Johnson, "A Festival Zeroes in on Quebec" *Maclean's* Vol.111, No.36, Sept. 7, 1998, p.52
- 25 Maurice Alioff, "Haunted by Hitchcock: Robert Lepage's *Le Confessionnel*" *Take One* Vol. 4 No. 9, p.14
- 26 Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema*, p. 306.
- 27 Wyndham Wise, *Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) p.153.
- 28 Johnson, "A Festival Zeroes in on Quebec" *Maclean's* p. 52.
- 29 *Globe and Mail*, Mar.18, 1999, p.A2.
- 30 *Take One* Vol.7 No.23, Sept.1999, p.46.
- 31 *Montreal Gazette* Aug. 28, 1998, pp.D1-D2.
- 32 See Kate Taylor, "Daring Lepage crosses borders and breeds in Quebec" *Globe and Mail* May 23, 2000 p.R1.
- 33 Isa Tounsi, "Fated Possibilities: A Conversation with Robert Lepage" *Take One* Winter 2001, p.15.
- 34 Matthew Hayes, "Art in the danger zone" *Globe and Mail* Oct.11, 2001, p. R1.
- 35 Monk, *Weird Sex and Snowshoes*, p.179.
- 36 Maurice Alioff, "Denis Villeneuve's *Un 32 août sur terre*: lost in the desert" *Take One* Vol.7, No.21, Fall, 1998, p.30.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 David Sherritt, "Quirky Canadian Film blends calm, chaos, and a talking fish" *Christian Science Monitor* Feb. 01, 2002.
- 39 Ann Hornaday, *Washington Post* Mar. 22, 2002, p.C05.
- 40 Wyndham Wise, *Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) p.136.
- 41 Ibid., p.214.
- 42 <http://membres.lycos/travelavant/denisvil.htm>. Sept. 17, 2001.
- 43 In Cynthia Amsdem's "Much ado about a fish" Villeneuve states "Water is about the beginning of life." *Take One* Winter 2001, p.24.
- 44 <http://membres.lycos/travelavant/denisvil.htm>.
- 45 Maurice Alioff, "Andre Turpin: things that come from the deep" *Take One* Vol. 5, No.35, Dec-Feb. 2001, p. 9
- 46 Ray Conlogue, "In the head of Andre Turpin" *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 15, 2002.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Alioff, "Andre Turpin" *Take One*, p.12.
- 49 Matthew Hays, "The critics may groan, but Les Boys are back" *Globe and Mail*, Oct.23, 2001, p.R5.
- 50 Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema*, p.x.



# Blood in the Maple Syrup

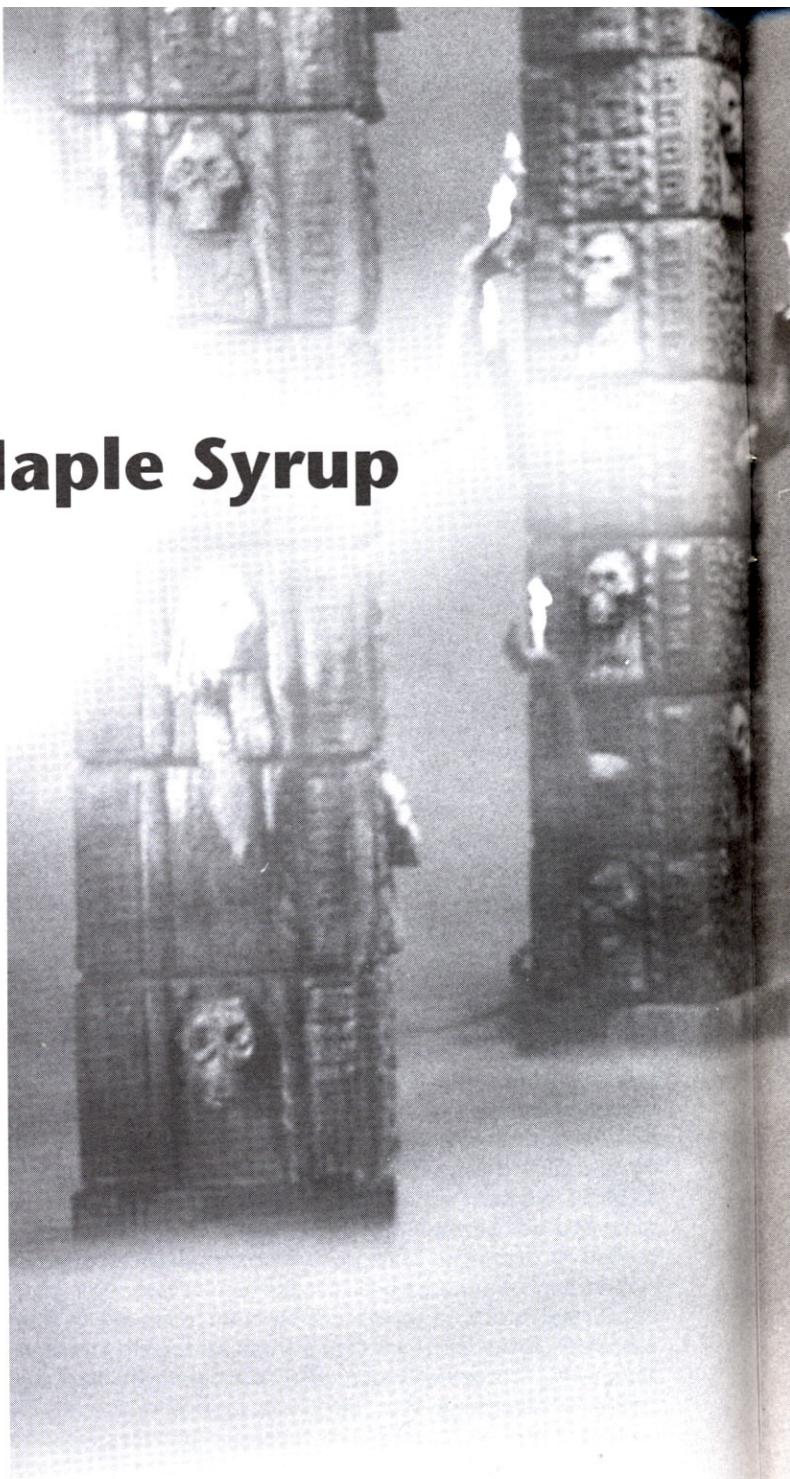
CANON, POPULAR GENRE  
AND THE CANUXPLOITATION  
OF JULIAN ROFFMAN

by Aaron Taylor

In his entire career, Julian Roffman (also alternatively known as Hoffman) has directed only two feature length films. Despite the modest international success of his second feature, *The Mask* (1961), which also represented the only Canadian feature-length fiction film to be distributed outside the country in its year of release, Roffman has not received recognition from any Canadian critics for his work, and his small corpus of films has faded into near-obscurity. Prior to 2001, no mention of his work could be found in any books on Canadian cinema, not even in such timelines as *Self Portrait's* "A Chronology of Canadian and Quebec Cinema: 1896-1976." Here, one would expect at least a passing reference, but in 1959, the year of *The Bloody Brood's* release, Pierre Veronneau only mentions "the private production of [unspecified] feature films," while in 1961, *Seul ou avec d'autres* (Claude Jutra) is the only film cited as being produced that year.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the respective efforts of Peter Harry Rist, Wyndham Rise, and the diligent co-editors of *Guide to the Cinema(s) of Canada* and *Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film* in providing comprehensive and encyclopaedic viewers' guides to Canadian cinema, both *The Bloody Brood* and *The Mask* are referenced. For better or for worse, Julian Roffman has been accorded a place within Canada's cinematic heritage, if only by exhaustive default.

Prior to 2001, the oversights of Veronneau and Peter Morris in their efforts at compilation seem more than accidental. Roffman's thrillers at least deserved an acknowledgement of their status as precursors to the big-grossing exploitation films produced by "Hollywood North" in the late 1970's and early 1980's. In 1977, for example, out of the 8.9 million dollars earned from the top 10 English films in Canada, 5.7 million were "earned by schlock items," and over half that gross was produced by David Cronenberg's *Shivers*.<sup>2</sup> Suggesting that Roffman's own work made Cronenberg's success possible sixteen years later is contestable, however, it is not untenable to

regard Roffman as somewhat of a Canadian pioneer within the genres of horror and suspense. Before *The Bloody Brood* and *The Mask*, both genres were left virtually unexplored by Canadian filmmakers. Since then, Canadian filmmakers have made several noteworthy contributions to the critically disreputable but popularly adored slasher genre, including *Cannibal Girls* (Ivan Reitman, 1973), *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), and *Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, 1980)—all of which are regarded as "classics" in their own right.<sup>3</sup>







*The Mask*

Not only are Roffman's films (and those of his lineage) dismissed as unworthy of serious consideration by Canadian film scholars, but the critical minimization of his work is indicative of a larger tendency to discount various kinds of films that do not fit into the corpus of what constitutes a "Canadian cinema." With the exception (that proves the rule) of Cronenberg's work, Canadian suspense and horror films, both exploitative and "legitimate" are not co-opted into the framework of our national cinema. And by "our" national cinema, I am referring

to the various conceptions of Canadian cinema circulated by academic film scholars. Canadian cinema as conceived by academics and Canadian cinema as conceived by the average moviegoer are two different things entirely, as any fan of *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1982), *Les Boys* (Louis Saic 1997), or *Flesh Gordon 2* (Howard Ziehm 1974) could tell you. At any rate, these films do not adhere to the criteria of an Elderian "Cinema We Need," nor Peter Harcourt's idealized realist tradition, nor the Eurocentric aesthetic values of a Northern "art



**If you're not  
back by midnight...  
you won't be  
coming home!**



## PROM NIGHT

cinema." Furthermore, the critical neglect of *The Bloody Brood* and *The Mask* are compounded by their production before 1964: the year popularly (and quite erroneously) regarded as the legitimate "birth" of Canadian cinema. In short, Roffman's films are anathema to the exclusionary specifications of canon builders because of their perceived lack of "quality" and "complexity," their generic status, and their untimely release.

It is not my ambition to champion the artistic merits of a neglected filmmaker's scant output; I shall leave such inflationary tactics to Roffman's fans. Nor shall I engage in close textual analysis of these works, as my primary concern is determining the films' relation to the cultural criteria of canonists rather than providing detailed formal readings for their own sake. Both *The Bloody Brood* and *The Mask* are formally interesting (especially compared with preconceived notions of a "classical" Canadian aesthetic), but again, I shall leave future appraisals to Roffman enthusiasts.

Instead, I would like to argue that reclaiming these films (and their descendents) within a Canadian corpus is necessary in preventing their disappearance into critical obscurity. Far from being "dumb movies for dumb people," *The Bloody Brood* and *The Mask* operate according to their own set of values—systems that are incommensurable to that of their more "legitimate" successors. Nonetheless, including "Canuxploitation" within the parameters of a national cinema may prove beneficial for a few reasons. Firstly, a critical revisiting of these films

is necessary in order to problematise unchallenged notions of "quality"—a prerequisite for inclusion in any kind of "legitimate" canon. Moreover, a consideration of their operations may also complicate the distinctions between exploitation and non-exploitation cinema. Most importantly, their inclusion within a national corpus may prove beneficial in expanding the boundaries of what is qualified as demonstrably "Canadian."

Although I consider the tracing out of symptoms of a national identity to be a futile endeavor given our particular socio-geographical and historical context, I recognize the economic importance behind the project. However retrogressive and unavailing it is to trot out the myth of an essential nationalist discourse, the guidelines of agencies such as Telefilm and the CFDC require a film to exude a "Canadianness" in order to secure funding.<sup>4</sup> Economic imperatives aside, Roffman's films deserve reclamation in order to deflate assumptions that his work is "inferior" due to its aping of standard, generic American product and that it does not distinctly reflect "our own" cinema. Such implicit distaste for the perceived crassness of the pleasures associated with Hollywood genres is largely behind the dearth of generic production in Canada and its positive critical reception.

At the most elementary level, one might argue that Roffman's work is rejected because of a perceived "poor quality." Such an argument could be (and has been) employed to exclude any number of films from a canon of critical "masterpieces." Often, a film's subject matter

alone is enough for critics to be dismissive. The narrative content of a Roffman film certainly does not have highbrow pretensions. In *The Bloody Brood*, the morally upright central protagonist, Cliff/Jack Betts takes it upon himself to investigate the suspicious death of his brother, Roy/Bill Kowalchuk. His private investigation leads him to penetrate the inner workings of a dreaded cabal: insidious beatniks hell-bent on subversion and bad poetry. Intrigued potential viewers, expect obligatory showdowns in dark alleys (with Peter Falk!) and gratuitous bongos. The narrative of *The Mask* also promises equally sensationalistic thrills. Eager to unlock the workings of the human mind, an overachieving psychiatrist experiments with a mysterious, ancient mask. Ignoring the advice of his doting girlfriend, the good doctor tries on the artefact. Intrigued potential viewers, expect trippy hallucinations (in 3-D!) and an inevitable stalk-'n-slash narrative trajectory.

As one might expect from these curt descriptions, the films' narratives do not have serious, "literary" ambitions, thematically speaking. They certainly do not fit into a national body of work that is preoccupied with questions of selfhood and the relation of the individual to a larger social identity. Roffman's films do not concern themselves with the ponderous introspection (one might say "self"-obsession) that characterises the tone of a good deal of Canadian feature films. The energies of the narratives seem to be extended toward the *individual* rather than the *subject*. Their workings seem to hail viewers personal-





*The Bloody Brood*

ly, in a desire to please or entertain, rather than construct an imaginary subject—the ever-elusive “average Canadian”—who is looking to Art for signs that will help “place” her own sense of selfhood within a national(ist) context. Or, to be facetious, maybe the narratives just weren’t boring enough for Canadian canonists. *The Bloody Brood’s* and *The Mask’s* respective tales of murderous beatniks and a cursed tribal mask can hardly be regarded as worthwhile material, when compared to the enthralling story of a couple of Nova Scotian labourers who are *Goin’ Down the Road* (Donald Shebib, 1970) to Toronto in search of employment. My remarks are deliberately inflammatory in the light of what I take to be a larger transgression. Ignoring a film due to its lack of “quality” subject matter is not only reprehensible in a country whose output of feature films is relatively limited, but also represents a failure to recognize the subjectiveness of “quality” itself.

In determining the constituents of filmic disreputability, some of the more obvious and demonstrable conditions include: 1) technical incompetence; 2) wooden acting; 3) poor scripting or plotting; 4) low production values; 5) lack of aesthetic value or a preoccupation with the sensational; 6) base subject matter; 7) an association with a lowbrow audience; 8) the implicit or explicit championing of ultra-conservative politics. What often fails to be recognized in the citation of any of these criteria is each category’s extreme subjectivity. Their subjection to continually changing critical contexts and discours-

es is almost universally unconsidered by critics and/or reviewers. None of the conditions are transcendent (they cannot be cited the same way throughout history) and each is rooted firmly in the temporal horizons that produce them.

Interestingly, such “shoddy” values are championed by cult followers of the films and proponents of fringe filmmaking. For Steve Richards, cult audiences enjoy films such as Roffman’s for the following reasons: 1) their often quirky modes of exhibition; 2) their commitment to escapism; 3) the interesting biographies of their directors; 4) their very obscurity itself; 5) their “rare bit of social commentary”; and 6) their value as camp.<sup>5</sup> The last category becomes extremely important for preservation purposes. Camp is not often discussed in terms of its function as a repository for work that would otherwise fade into obscurity. Here, a campy, or highly ironic celebration of pure bathos has an important historical value that critics of camp might do well to consider.

Furthermore, exploitation and other films of “poor quality” are not without their own unique brand of politics. On the one hand, Roffman’s films are rather backwards, politically speaking: like most American exploitation, their representations of women are quite retrograde, and the depiction of contemporary subculture in *The Bloody Brood* is hyper-conservative as well as reactionary. On the other hand, while many exploitation films are apolitical or politically retrogressive in terms of their textual functioning, they are not without politically sub-





versive value. Their mild iconoclasm may lie in the sheer audaciousness of their content, rather than their commitment to social commentary. That is, these films transform the profane into loving *spectacle*: witness young Roy's last moments in *The Bloody Brood* as his intestines are punctured by ground glass hidden in a murderous hamburger, as well as the outrageous sex and death imagery of the 3-D sequences in *The Mask*. Thus, trash cinema can be linked to the oppositional practices of more "legitimate" art (such as dada or some radical manifestations of postmodernism). It can be "as apocalyptic and nihilistic, as hostile to meaning, form, pleasure and the specious good as many types of high art."<sup>6</sup> Although intentionality is certainly different between these two types of art (in terms of creative versus economic ambitions), the results for the viewer/observer can be quite similar.

And it is here, at the level of *audience* and *reception*, that the films' real subversiveness may be located. The viewing of such "substandard" cinema can often result in the following: 1) an unadulterated pleasure at the "low," "base," or "carnal" qualities of the films; 2) resistance to the technical slickness of filmmaking's more dominant modes; 3) a subversion of "acceptable" exhibition and viewing practices; and 4) the potential undermining of "legitimate" criticism.<sup>7</sup> For Timothy Corrigan, films that achieve cult status "invariably subvert and run contrary to the immobility and passivity which regulate standard

viewing and reading practices."<sup>8</sup> While the cult status of Roffman's films is certainly not comparable to that of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sherman, 1975), *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977), or even *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), the audiences who have seen and love such films do so for their own idiosyncratic reasons and despite all efforts to persuade them to the contrary. The adoption of "bad" texts for their own sake demonstrates that "neither texts nor audiences are univocal; the meanings and pleasures of the texts are rather described by audiences to suit specific and often incommensurable needs."<sup>9</sup> By privileging the subjective pleasure-making of the spectator, the power to discern what shall be deemed of "superior quality" is removed from the singular control of the critic and dispersed much more democratically among audiences.

Accepting this assumption also means recognizing the arbitrariness of the processes by which cultural products are assigned as "good" or "bad." One need only consider the number of films panned upon their initial release, only to be re-evaluated and reclaimed by critics years later (*Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), of course, being the most oft-cited example). Problematising the various contingencies of value is not an attempt to elevate such products, or attribute to them a greater degree of sophistication that may or may not be present. Rather, it must be recognized that no cultural placement of evaluation of a film is *innocent, objective, or definitive*.



By troubling the assumptions of canonization, and other interconnected projects, one troubles the idea "that value [is] a determinate property of texts and that the critic, by virtue of certain innate acquired capacities (taste, sensibility, etc.), [is] someone specifically equipped to discriminate it."<sup>10</sup> All too often, Canadian film academics lose sight of the self-interrogating processes that are imperative to any successful study within the field; that our self-proclaimed status as "educated arbiters of taste" must be continually deconstructed. Critics must be ever conscious of the politics of taste, which function according to a polarizing binary. In Pierre Bordieu's words, "tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror of visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the taste of others."<sup>11</sup> One must be constantly aware that "taste" implies artificial cultural hierarchies and that the denigration of "uneducated" pleasures enforces the restrictive boundaries between the powered and disenfranchised.

By deconstructing the idea of qualitative difference, one simultaneously disassembles the hierarchical structure of canonizing projects. To begin with, Roffman's films can be historically situated as precursors to the much more sensationalistic exploitation films that were to follow in the next two decades. Both *The Bloody Brood* and *The Mask* carry on from the tradition of the American "B-film," with their (relatively) low production values and micro-budgets. However, unlike the "B" system, in which "culturally respectable form and subject matter, even given good reviews, was not enough to project a film's A status if the studio stood to make greater profits through distributing other features in its choice first-run theatres," the narrative content of exploitation makes no pretence at said cultural respectability.<sup>12</sup> According to Leslie Halliwell, the exploitation film is widely considered to be "without discernable merit apart from the capability of being sensationalised."<sup>13</sup>

Even with the brief attempt at classification delineated above, there is some difficulty in determining precisely what one means by the term "exploitation." Describing it as a genre is problematic. For Paul Watson, "exploitation is defined not in terms of the film itself, but by the means in which it is sold to its potential audience. It is not so much a systematic discourse, as generic definitions necessarily imply, but rather a discourse of systemisation."<sup>14</sup> Here, the emphasis is on the film's intended design of consumption. In a similar vein, Ephraim Katz's definition of exploitation is interesting in that it is expansive enough to eclipse most Hollywood product as well: "films made with little or no attention to artistic merit but with an eye to profit, usually via high-pressure sales and promotion techniques emphasizing some sensational aspect of the product."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the mutual goal for producers of exploitation and Hollywood executives is the film's generation of maximum profits.

Besides the Hollywood blockbuster's intended address to a large, international demographic versus the hailing of exploitation's more limited specialized audience, there may be little difference between the two cinemas. Especially with respect to their approach to content, in which *spectacle* is emphasised above all else, the two are surprisingly similar. The films' promotion of spectacle, in conjunction with the stripping down of narrative elements to bare essentials and their endorsement of a pleasure that is *affective* is reminiscent of Tom Gunning's "cinema of attractions." Although originally conceived to form a link between primitive cinema and the avant-garde, Gunning's model can be appropriated to describe

both the blockbuster and exploitation cinema:

[the cinema of attractions] incit[es] visual curiosity, and suppl[ies] pleasure through an exciting spectacle... Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasising the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe... Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward toward the character-based situations essential to classical narrative.<sup>16</sup>

In particular, *The Mask's* 3-D sequences are excellent examples of such a cinema. One witnesses a foregrounding of spectacle (live human sacrifice!), the dominance of "theatrical display" (blazing fireballs, various spooks, and fun-house-like *mise-en-scène*), and an "outward" motion of energy "toward an acknowledged spectator" (the voice-over narration commanding both the doctor and audience to "Put the mask on, now"). Such sequences are typical of both exploitation cinema and the blockbuster, both of which are punctuated by "descriptive pauses." These are "moments independent of plot but concerned with rendering 'the properties of things,' [especially] the properties of the human body, for voyeuristic purposes."<sup>17</sup> Many scenes in *The Mask* foreground the mortification of the flesh (Michael's mutilated face, for example). For the exploitation film, "the discursive procedure which cinematographically defines [them], is the production of the *transformation of the body into flesh*."<sup>18</sup> Naturally, similar fleshy transubstantiations are a necessary component of the more graphic of Hollywood blockbusters.

How, then to differentiate between the culturally legitimised cinema of the average Hollywood generic blockbuster, and the culturally denigrated exploitation film? Differences are especially difficult to determine considering their interconnected economic development. One might argue that exploitation's subversive value as an oppositional cinema is limited since its "significance relates not to the realms of the paracinema, but rather to the fundamental aesthetic and economic axioms by which Hollywood operates."<sup>19</sup> And yet, although the maximisation of profit margins appears to dictate the form of both Hollywood and exploitation product, they are not altogether dissimilar kinds of film art.

Critical refuge cannot be found in continuing to argue that difference can be perceived by an ostensible discrepancy in "quality." In compiling the few existing references to Roffman's films, one discovers that reviews of his work are not always poor. Although *The Motion Picture Guide* calls *The Bloody Brood* "a waste of good celluloid,"<sup>20</sup> *The Mask* is regarded as a slight improvement, getting at least one star, rather than zero, and described as "a fairly uninspired horror film."<sup>21</sup> If the comments of the *Guide's* reviewers seem to damn with faint praise, there are more noteworthy appraisals. For example, out of the dozens of horror films produced in North America in 1961, Phil Hardy's *Horror* anthology inexplicably chooses to review *The Mask*.<sup>22</sup> The film is also praised by Paul Corupe as "one of the strangest and best Canuxploitation films of all time," and his review contains such adjectives as "enjoyable" and "haunting."<sup>23</sup> Finally, the film enjoyed a favourable review in *The New York Times* (of all places), in which Howard Thompson claims that the film "wears a becoming, scrubbed look," is "sharply





photographed," contains acting that "is consistently good," and that its "unfamiliar roster of players" and story were "two more assets."<sup>24</sup> Thus, even a few good reviews must force a reappraisal of *The Mask* as a poor film, according to the criteria of inferiority outlined earlier.

The praise of the film's cinematography certainly does not speak to the director's alleged technical incompetence. Roffman received training as a filmmaker in the United States and assisted by the esteemed Slavko Vorkapich (who designed the 3-D sequences and was well-regarded for his editing of the celebrated montage sequence in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*), the look of *The Mask* is extremely professional. Although there are some rough edges to the films (particularly the sloppy editing in *The Bloody Brood*), both films appear to be more technically accomplished efforts than other accepted "classics" of Canadian cinema. As examples, *Le chat dans le sac* (Gilles Groulx, 1964) and *A tout prendre* (Claude Jutra, 1963) come immediately to mind. While Roffman's films represent a drastically different stylistic approach to filmmaking from the above two films, they seem to blend form and content together more efficiently than Groulx and Jutra's respective efforts, which both suffer from moments of wilfully "experimental" stylistic irrelevancy.

Any criticism of the films' "wooden acting" can be partially dismissed under the rubric of subjectivity (one could again counter with the *Times* review). Moreover, the basis of value for determining the value of a film's performances is often mimetic: a "good" performance is a "realistic" performance. However, not only do ideals of naturalistic acting continually shift, the stylised performances in both of Roffman's films are

not commensurable with realist criteria. The exaggerated mannerisms of the actors in *The Bloody Brood* (including a menacing, pre-Columbo Peter Falk) and *The Mask* are appropriate to both their period and respective genres. Furthermore, it is questionable that these performances are any better or worse than those in established Canadian "classics." And if nothing else, one can at least enjoy the performances after a historical remove, in which they can be appreciated according to the loving ironies of camp.

Lest we put too much critical stock in *The New York Times'* lone voice in the wilderness, allow me to make a slight qualification instead *vis a vis* a potential charge of "bad writing." What is usually described as poor scripting is actually a deficiency in the *plotting* of the film: in the case of the horror film or thriller, a shoddy writer fails to create suspense, dramatic rhythm, and narrative coherence. However, the script is not of as great import in the horror/exploitation genre; it is often de-emphasised in favour of spectacle. In this regard, such underdeveloped scripts are not altogether unworthy of comparison to the typically sketchy narratives of Canadian realist classics. Moreover, such films typically rely heavily on the abilities of unprofessional actors to carry a scene—individuals whose improvisational skills are not always up to the task. With its meandering narrative trajectory, loose story structure, and amateur performances, *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (Don Owen, 1964) is the most obviously relevant example of such an aesthetic.

Low production values are obviously a factor in all independent filmmaking. Furthermore, an "unpolished" aesthetic born out of limited monetary resources is a condition of any national cinema without a substantial financial infrastructure



that supports filmmakers or one that offers only limited economic assistance. Having the multi-million dollar budgets of Hollywood generic films as our closest point of reference does not assist the positive reception of a nickel-and-dime store Canadian equivalent. One might criticize Roffman and other exploitation directors for making films that do not lend themselves to small budgets. Extravagant special effects are costly, especially since they must appear *convincing* to an increasingly fickle audience. Here again, however, the ghost of the realist tradition haunts even the most fantastic of genres, imposing its incommensurable values on Roffman's work.

Turning, then, to the actual *content* of the films, it is necessary to deflate the valorisation of an "aesthetic value" and an avoidance of sensationalism as conditions for canonization. As has already been indicated, for the cinema of attractions, sensationalism is an actual virtue in and of itself. Furthermore, the driving force behind the production of exploitation films is the generation of profits. In viewing the films, it becomes clear that these are texts that are unapologetic about their lack of artistic pretence. It is especially hypocritical for the Canadian critic to bemoan the alleged absence of epicurean aspirations in films such as Roffman's. In order to ensure the continuation of their work, it is imperative for Canadian filmmakers that their films make money. Returning to the example of Cronenberg, whose *Shivers* was unanimously panned by nearly every critic in the country upon its release, one should recall John Hofsess' apology: "In matters of culture... it always pays to remember that it's the broad base of a pyramid that supports the peak."<sup>25</sup> For Cronenberg, it took the financial success of a film like *Shivers* to ensure the production of his later, more "arty" films that Canadian critics have embraced—*Videodrome* (1983), *Dead Ringers* (1988), and *Crash* (1997) being prominent examples.

Like *Shivers*, have *The Bloody Brood* and *The Mask* been dismissed from an academic canon because of an apparently "base" subject matter? Carnality, or luridness is certainly not a quality limited to exploitation cinema. Many so-called "art" films are just as sanguineous or scatological. *Leolo* (Jean-Claude Lauzon, 1992), for example, contains an abundance of bizarre unpleasanties including: accidental impregnation via semen shot onto an Italian tomato, an obsession with excretion, masturbation with a piece of raw meat and its subsequent consumption, and bestiality. And yet, the film is able to win the Genie for Best Film of its year because the violence and scatology are heavily aestheticized. *Leolo* is shot quite beautifully, compared to the matter-of-factness with which Roffman often presents scenes of "grossness."

A preoccupation with the Rabelaisian is often associated with a lowbrow audience, and hence, it is anathema to any self-respecting film scholar. For Bourdieu, "the most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the processors of legitimate culture is the reuniting of tastes that taste dictates shall be separated."<sup>26</sup> Taste, then, retains its function as a weapon in class warfare, ensuring that the social division between those who serve and those who eat remains distinct. The manufacturing of an artificially determined "refined" sensibility also becomes a matter of nationalism. Implicit in Canadian critics' rejection of Roffman's films is a desire to elevate our cinema above the "crassness" of an American *savior-faire*, whose cinema *The Bloody Brood* and *The Mask* seem to emulate.

Finally, all speculations as to their potential subversiveness aside, are the films politically retrogressive? Or rather, are they

any more politically reprehensible than many of the films of either Hollywood or a Canadian art cinema? For example, the ultra-conservative (and often hilarious) depiction of beatnik subculture in *The Bloody Brood* is not far off from similar reactionary representations in a Fred Astaire musical made three years earlier, *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1956).<sup>27</sup> If anything, *The Bloody Brood* is apolitical. Its release comes a few years too late to capitalize fully on the wave of beatnik flicks that inundate the drive-ins of the United States in the mid-1950's (just as in 1961, *The Mask* misses the boat on the 3-D phenomenon which had, by that time, already seen its peak four years earlier). It is unlikely, then, that a Canadian film about a (primarily) American subculture that is already on its way out has anything relevant to say about the subject matter politically or ideologically. If one must force an ideological reading onto *The Bloody Brood*, one could potentially argue that the film is a critique of American (sub)cultural penetration into Canada—a subculture that is later celebrated so readily in the bouncy hip-piedom of Denis Heroux's forgotten sexploitation film, *Valerie* (1968). The film enacts an extremely punitive narrative and sketches caricatures of the assorted hipsters who frequent The Digs, especially the perpetually fried Dave/Ron Taylor ("Cooooool weeeeed, maaaaaan!") and Paul/Kenneth Wickes, a would-be Canadian Ginsberg.

Ultimately, in referencing films such as Roffman's, one finds that "exploitation films do not meet the standards of the mainstream cinema simply because they have separate standards of their own."<sup>28</sup> These "separate standards" are readily acknowledged by the audiences who love the films. Furthermore, applying the standards of a Canadian art cinema (which is itself Europhilic) to Roffman's is unfair; such values are incommensurable with his work. Although one may argue that the elitist opinions of academia have little material results on film production or popular reception itself, it is an odd coincidence that Roffman made only one more film after *The Mask*. Despite the film's modest financial success and international distribution, Roffman disappears from feature filmmaking following his work as a writer and producer on an American B-feature, *The Glove* (Ross Hagen, 1978).

Just as Roffman "vanishes" from filmmaking, one observes a tendency among Canadian filmmakers to likewise render genre invisible. A brief survey of Canadian fiction films reveals that the number of non-generic features far outweighs that of generic films.<sup>29</sup> Allowing for the generalization that genre has primarily been an American cinematic preoccupation, generic invisibility in Canadian cinema seems to represent a disassociational tendency. The more spectacular of genres are avoided in favour of more distinctly nationalistic fare. While critics such as Bruce Elder and Peter Harcourt composed their respective manifestos during a socio-political period in which the rubric of nationalist discourse dictated the creation of a "Canadian cinema," one that could be acknowledged as a competent presence on an international scene, their prescriptions have long since expired.<sup>30</sup> Concretizing a Canadian canon should no longer be a political imperative, especially in light of the questionable status of unitary nationhood itself.<sup>31</sup> Establishing a limited corpus of films whose function it is to exude a certain "Canadianness" does not seem compatible with the hybridised and mutable nature of our national culture.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Jim Leach has pointed out the importance of considering this new interest in cultural diversity recognisable



Black Christmas



in recent Canadian cinema, especially those films that "link their national contexts to the broader experience of globalisation and postmodernity."<sup>33</sup> And yet, if this "global" mass culture remains predominantly American in appearance, it is unsurprising that critics with interests in formulating a distinctly Canadian canon would eschew generic product that seems to emulate such "popular" (read: American) forms.

Geoff Pevere believes "our" Canadian cinema to be elitist as well as retrogressively nationalistic. The cinema idealized by Bruce Elder, for example, strives to be "separate from and unsullied by the grime and corruption of everyday discourse and popular taste."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the cinematic tradition that Harcourt espouses in "1964: The Beginning of a Beginning," is just as imperious. It seems almost sacrilege to claim that the documentary-realism enjoyed by Harcourt appeals and speaks to just as *marginal* an audience in Canada as Elder's non-narrative, anti-realist, and self-reflexive cinema. And yet, if a very small number of people view these films, when compared to the high-grossing numbers of a *Porky's* or *Shivers*, the "Canadianness" of Harcourt or Elder's cinema seems limited, if not outright debatable. While the original intentions behind the composition of these essays may have been noble, Pevere's desire for critics to evaluate "the cinema we got," rather than devise prescriptive manifestos is valid. Such didactic lists are inherently exclusionary and films such as Roffman's that do

not prescribe to their conditions become casualties, unworthy of even the most trivial historical acknowledgement. Generic films in particular certainly fit neither the qualifications of Harcourt nor Elder. They are shameful aberrations; art cinema's bastard offspring.

I would argue that the very transparency of their generic qualities lead to the dismissal of Roffman's films.<sup>35</sup> As representatives of their respective genres, there seems to be little to distinguish them from their contemporaries in the United States. Even some of the kinder reviews describe both films as fairly run-of-the-mill. Thus, the rationale behind their exclusion from a Canadian canon is twofold: not only do these films simply ape Hollywood product, they do not do it very well. If these films are representative of a colonized imagination, the emulation of their southern colonizers is a reprehensible project according to those who engage in canon construction.<sup>36</sup>

Roffman's films do not seem to adopt their generic conventions in ways that seem subversive or deconstructive. Critics' darling, Denys Arcand claims that in using genre, Canadian filmmakers should deconstruct them as a defensive measure. In his film, *La Maudite galette* (1971), Arcand claims that he denies generic pleasure in order to "produce an uneasiness in the spectator which will be difficult to identify to begin with because it is caused by a modification of the cinematic language itself."<sup>37</sup> Arcand employs unconventional forms and narrative structures to defamiliarize his audience's reception of genre. However, the necessity of constructing such defensive measures is arguable. Likewise, the general abstinence among Canadian filmmakers from making overtly generic films is troubling.

At first glance, the most obvious reason behind the dearth of generic filmmaking in Canada is the limited finances available to the films' producers. Simply put, Canadian filmmakers do not have the economic resources to engage in the more spectacular of genres. However, Jim Leach speaks of a more unsettling reason. He claims that "the sense of security [that genre provides] is precisely what is lacking, almost by definition, in the more traditional (or progressive?) Canadian cinema that explores...the uncertainties of the Canadian experience."<sup>38</sup> For Leach, these experiential "uncertainties" are attributable to our perceived lack of a concrete national identity. A shorthand version of the implicit thrust behind his arguments might read as such: "Canadians don't make generic movies because they're afraid of American assimilation."

Although Canada may constitute just another domestic market for American product, Hollywood neo-imperialism does not necessarily preclude the production of Canadian generic films. Conceiving of the suspense or horror film as definitively American genres establishes a fixity in our ideas of what constitutes both genre and (by extension) nationhood itself. Accepting genres as stable also discounts the audience's ability to resist accepting standard generic product at face value. Despite our proximity to the United States, our peripheral status (as far as Hollywood is concerned) should allow us to read genre differently than those audiences for whom it is closer. While sceptics may criticize a privileging of a marginalized audience's critical faculties as an exercise in romanticism, efforts towards devising a different Canadian viewing practice may prove to be more fruitful than devising a "distinctly" Canadian cinema. Unfortunately, such a project may be inhibited by detractors who would credit the northern reception of





American genres as ironic at best—a tweaking of American sensibilities. If Canada is situated as Other and takes up the genres associated with the forces perceived as being responsible for its marginalisation in a global cultural market, one wonders if audiences do anything subversive with these texts. In Roffman's case, then, the reasons why popular audiences are more happy with his films than critics become obvious.

But although the films' content do not seem seditious generically, perhaps the experience of Canadian generic films is *inherently* subversive. A generous critic may allow for the powers of automatic critique by geographic default. To conceive of an analogy, one may turn to the work of Paul Coates, who claims that audiences do not consume the exploitation film innocently due to the excessive nature of its content. In other words, "the dubious material is presented together with a mechanism for its disavowal: it has built-in 'credible deniability.' This split within the consciousness of the films permits them to address a divided self, a divided community."<sup>39</sup> The audience of the Canadian generic film represents a similar "divided community." To use Leach against himself, it is due to the "uncertainties of [our] Canadian experience," and a national identity that is extremely *hybridized*, that we should be sensitive to the schizophrenic nature of the films themselves. In Roffman's films, the threads of cultural suturing may become easier for the Canadian viewer to detect. Consider, for

example, the anomaly of Nico in *The Bloody Brood*. Peter Falk's oily assertiveness, virulent charisma, and thick Brooklyn accent seem extremely out of place in a Canadian context dominated by "cowards, bullies, and clowns."<sup>40</sup> Might a suggestion be forwarded, then, that Canadian audiences simultaneously receive *and* disavow the pleasures of genre? While it seems naive to suggest that Roffman's films inherently critique or comment on the very genres they adopt, it should be possible to conceive of an experience of Canadian genre that is *different* from American practices.

Alternative practices performed by Canadian audiences have yet to be theorized. For now, what can be concluded is that, radically speaking, nothing is "wrong" with the films of Julian Roffman, as quality has been determined to be an extremely relative value. Just as very little differentiates a "good" film from a "poor" film, exploitation and non-exploitation cinema are closer kin than one might assume. Additionally, the criteria that are often used for the purposes of canonization are extremely limiting and are incommensurable with a large corpus of Canadian film, including the critically disowned tradition of exploitation. As generic examples of the thriller and horror film, Roffman's work is included within a type of filmmaking typically eschewed by the majority of Canadian filmmakers.

At the same time, however, recent years have seen an



increase in straightforward generic productions in Canada. Noteworthy examples include the SF thriller, *Cube* (Vincenzo Natali, 1997) and the quasi-feminist update on the "I-Was-a-Teenage-Werewolf" sub-genre, *Ginger Snaps* (John Fawcett, 2000). Despite their popularity on both the domestic and international markets, neither of these films are likely to achieve the kind of critical laurels heaped upon Cronenberg or Robert Lepage for their respective forays into popular genres, nor are they likely to receive timeless status as representative works of a distinctly Canadian Cinema. But while directors have generally avoided making explicitly generic films, those that represent the exception do not always or necessarily ape Hollywood product. Moreover, the Canadian experience of genre is one that can be potentially self-interrogating, fluid, and may speak to a dynamic (because unstable) national identity. By reevaluating the Canadian production of popular film genres, we are only on the verge of developing a new "dream-life," one in which the "younger brother" may finally be allowed to grow up.

*I would like to dedicate this article to André Loiselle, who teaches an MA course on the casualties of the Canadian cinematic canon at Carleton University, and who brought Roffman's films to my attention. I would also like to thank both André and Katherine Grant at the University of Kent at Canterbury as well for reading early drafts of this paper.*

**Aaron Taylor** is a PhD candidate at the University of Kent at Canterbury. He has written for *The Canadian Journal of Film Studies* and is a contributor to the forthcoming anthology, *Rethinking Disney: Private Control and Public Dimensions*.

## Notes

- 1 Pierre Veronneau, "A Chronology of Canadian and Quebec Cinema," in *Self Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas*. Ed. Veronneau and Piers Handling (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1980), 190. *The Mask* is also briefly mentioned in Gene Walz's introduction to his anthology, *Canada's Best Features: Critical Essays on 15 Canadian Films* (Toronto: Rodopi, 2002).
- 2 John Hofsess, "Fear and Loathing to Order," in *Canadian Film Reader*. Ed. Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson (Toronto: P. Martin Associates, 1977), 274.
- 3 *Cannibal Girls* launched the career of Reitman, who produced Cronenberg's first feature and later went on to become a successful Hollywood director and producer. *Black Christmas* still receives irreverent seasonal television screenings internationally. *Prom Night* starred "Scream Queen" Jamie Lee Curtis, and was successful enough to spawn three sequels.
- 4 Of course, such restrictions do not help filmmakers such as Deepa Mehta, whose films about India are not eligible for financial assistance from these agencies, but that is another matter entirely.
- 5 Steve Richards, "That's Cool, That's Trash! Confessions of a B-movie Fanatic" (*Broken Pencil* 11, Fall 1999), 18-19.
- 6 Tania Modleski, "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory" in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Ed. Modleski and Kathryn Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 162.
- 7 Compare the rhapsodizing of Cameron Bailey in his prefatory remarks to the broadcast of any Canadian film on television's "Showcase Revue" to the more honest vulgarities of Elvira, Mistress of the Dark in her remarks about *The Mask* at the end of the 1994 Rhino Home Video edition.
- 8 Timothy Corrigan, "Film and the Culture of Cult" (*Wide Angle* 8/3, 1986), 96.
- 9 I.Q. Hunter and Heidi Kaye, Introduction to *Trash Aesthetics: Popular Culture and Its Audience*. Ed. Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye, and Imelda Wheelan (Chicago: Pluto, 1997), 3. My italics.
- 10 Barbara Hernstein Smith, "Contingencies of a Value" (*Critical Inquiry* 10/1, 1983), 3.
- 11 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (London: Routledge, 1986), 56.
- 12 Lea Jacobs, "The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction" (*Screen* 33/1, 1992), 13.
- 13 Cited in Maitland McDonagh, *Filmmaking on the Fringe: The Good, the Bad, and the Deviant Directors* (Secaucus: Carol Pub, 1995), viii.
- 14 Paul Watson, "There's No Accounting for Taste: Exploitation Cinema and the Limits of Film Theory" in Cartmell, 78.
- 15 Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 432.
- 16 Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde" in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*. Ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 58-59.
- 17 Craig Fischer, "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls and the Exploitation Genre" (*The Velvet Light Trap* 30, Fall 1992), 20.
- 18 Gareth Sansom, "Fangoric Horrority: The Subject and Ontological Horror in a Contemporary Cinematic Sub-Genre" (*Social Discourse* 2/1, 1989), 167.
- 19 Watson, 67.
- 20 Jay Robert Nash and Stanley Ralph Ross, *The Motion Picture Guide: 1927-1983*, Volume 5 (Chicago: Cinebooks, 1985), 1244.
- 21 Ibid, 1895.
- 22 Phil Hardy, ed. *Horror* (London: Aurum Press, 1993), 143.
- 23 Paul Corupe, "Canuxploitation!" (*Broken Pencil* 11, Fall 1999), 12.
- 24 Howard Thompson, "The Mask" (*The New York Times*, October 28, 1961), 4.
- 25 Hofsess, 278.
- 26 Bourdieu, 57.
- 27 In this film, Astaire winces at the gangly undulations of Audrey Hepburn during her "Basal Metabolism" number in a bohemian, Parisian bistro. He also infiltrates a gathering of languid beats by wearing a beret and false goatee.
- 28 Randall Clark, *At a Theatre or Drive-In Near You: The History, Culture, and Politics of American Exploitation* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 177.
- 29 By "generic" I am referring to Rick Altman's early model in "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre" (*Cinema Journal* 3, 1984), 6-18. Here, he identifies genre films as those with highly visible semantic and syntactic codes.
- 30 The idealized criteria of Elder and Harcourt can be found in the following two articles: Bruce Elder, "The Cinema We Need" in *Documents in Canadian Film*. Ed. Douglas Fetherling (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1988), 260-271; and Peter Harcourt, "1964: The Beginning of a Beginning," in Veronneau and Handling, 64-72.
- 31 Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity" in *Modernity and Its Futures*. Ed. Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 297.
- 32 To be fair to Harcourt, he has since opened up his initial conception of a Canadian cinema in order to embrace its (alleged) commitment to pluralism. For further details, see Peter Harcourt, "Faces Changing Colour Changing Canon: Shifting Cultural Foci Within Contemporary Canadian Cinema" (*CineAction* 45, 1998): 5-16.
- 33 Jim Leach, "The Reel Nation: Image and Reality in Contemporary Canadian Cinema" (*Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 11/2, 2002), 8.
- 34 Geoff Pevere, "The Rites (and Wrongs) of the Elder or The Cinema We Got: The Critics We Need," in Fetherling, 331.
- 35 Ironically enough, the supernatural and mysterious have always occupied a revered place generically in the arts in Canada. See Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
- 36 And yet, in turning once again to the example of *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, those critics who are ready to hail the film as a cornerstone of a Canadian aesthetic do not seem to recognize the ways in which the film is extremely derivative of the work produced by a giant of the American independent cinema—John Casevettes.
- 37 Denys Arcand, "La Maudite Galette" (*Cinema Quebec* 2/1, 1972), 11.
- 38 Jim Leach, "The Body Snatchers: Genre and Canadian Cinema" in *Film Genre Reader*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 358.
- 39 Paul Coates, *Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 176.
- 40 These being the three kinds of archetypal Canadian protagonists identified by Robert Fothergill in his oft-cited article, "Coward, Bully, Clown: The Dream-Life of a Younger Brother" (*Canadian Film Reader*, Ed. Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson, Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977), 234-250.





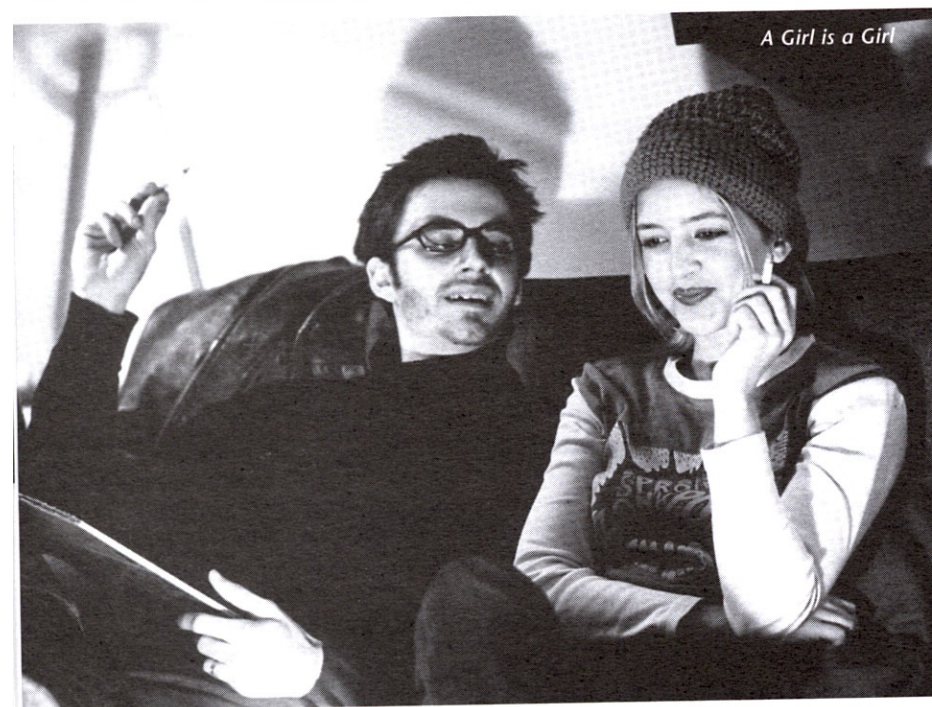
## Charting the Course of the Pacific New Wave

by Diane Burgess

The first time that I heard about the Pacific New Wave was at the Vancouver International Film Festival in 1999. Then Canadian Images Programmer, Ken Anderlini, had been asked about this new west coast filmmaking movement by Cori Howard of the *National Post*. With an unprecedented six BC fiction features in the Canadian Images program, it seemed possible that we were witnessing the beginnings of "something comparable to that earlier moment in Ontario when a new group of filmmakers focussed attention on Canadian cinema."<sup>1</sup> Anderlini proceeded to write a short article for the festival newsletter assessing whether or not there might be a "West Coast Nouvelle Vague." But, faced with a diverse group of films that includes Mort Ransen's glossy *Touched* (1999), Scott Smith's gritty *rollercoaster* (1999) and Ryan Bonder's magical *DayDrift* (1999), he concludes that the notion of a new wave "might be stretching it, but [that] these films do prove that BC is more than just a Hollywood back lot."<sup>2</sup> The only "clear connection" he cites is the films share "emotional intensity and integrity."<sup>3</sup> At the 2000 festival, the number of BC fiction features rose to eight, including five debuts. In the introductory essay for the Canadian Images section, the Pacific New Wave reference is re-deployed with the suggestion that the films "honestly explore our West Coast culture."<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, in a *Georgia Straight* cover story, local film critic Ken Eisner notes that four of the debut features—*Protection* (2000), *Middlemen* (2000), *We All Fall Down* (1999) and *No More*





*Monkeys Jumpin' on the Bed* (2000)—share “an uncommon grit, not to mention rampant dysfunction and drug use...all in a doggedly naturalistic style and with remarkably similar settings.”<sup>5</sup> Linking the films to Canada’s “long-standing documentary tradition,” Eisner describes the new wave in terms of “new realism” and explains that each of these first-timers “indicated that more money and market concerns wouldn’t have too much bearing on their styles, which all aim, with varying techniques, for the purity of experience.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, the term Pacific New Wave gained headline status in the fall of 2001 with Mark Peranson’s *Globe and Mail* feature on Bruce Sweeney’s *Last Wedding* (2001). According to Peranson, the inclusion of five BC films in the 2001 Toronto International Film Festival along with the selection of *Last Wedding* “as the first BC film ever to open this trendsetting event” suggests that the talk of a west coast new wave may in fact have “some basis in reality.”<sup>7</sup> In particular, he argues that “to match the flowering of filmmakers in Ontario in the 1980’s...A-list”<sup>8</sup> directors like Sweeney will begin to emerge from the West. So, if the moment is indeed taking root, perhaps it is a good time to ask what Pacific New Wave means. This term has tended to be applied by those who, despite their links to the BC film community, are relative outsiders, while within the community, the label has been greeted with great skepticism.

The first reference to a Pacific New Wave can be found in Cori Howard’s article “The Irony of the Anti-blockbuster,” which appeared in the August 7, 1999 issue of the *National Post*. Howard’s discussion focuses on Canada’s first two Dogme films: Set in an abandoned Vancouver shipyard, Marc Rétailleau’s feature debut *Noroc* (“good luck”) is a “largely autobiographical tale about a Romanian immigrant’s struggle to survive in Canada,” while Carl Bessai’s *Johnny* follows a group of “disaffected squeegee kids” living on the streets of Toronto.<sup>9</sup> Both films attempt to conform to the ten tenets of Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg’s 1995 Dogme Vow of Chastity with varying degrees of success. *Noroc*’s co-producer and cinematographer James Tocher explains that “If you follow the rules and don’t see the joke, you’ve missed the point. We didn’t feel the rules were meant to be taken literally.”<sup>10</sup> Re-dubbing it as the “vow of fertility,” Tocher states that “the Dogme philosophy helps remind filmmakers what’s necessary and unnecessary.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, *Noroc* exemplifies the type of affective bare-bones storytelling that can be accomplished with almost no budget. Director Rétailleau had been living in the shipyard warehouse that would serve as



the film's key setting and, from his office window, he was able to observe the big budget Hollywood features and MOW's that also made use of this popular location. Ironically, since the Dogme rules preclude post-production sound mixing, *Noroc* had to "incorporate the sound of guns in the background,"<sup>12</sup> a move that reinforces both the grittiness of Retailleau's narrative and the overshadowing of local independent production by Hollywood North.

For Howard, the irony of anti-blockbusters like *Noroc* and *Johnny* is that the trendiness of the Dogme aesthetic has given these filmmakers invaluable exposure such that ultra low-budget production can potentially serve as a stepping-stone to bigger projects. During the interview, Bessai mentions his plan to re-locate to Vancouver in order "to work with other independent filmmakers on a post-dogma trend...[that] he calls 'the Pacific New Wave.'"<sup>13</sup> With this as the extent of the article's reference to new directions in west coast filmmaking, Howard's pursuit of further information is understandable, although the somewhat baffled response of Vancouver programmers must have been unexpected. Perhaps the key to Bessai's comment has something to do with the growth of digital production in Vancouver. Lacking funding for a 35 mm blow-up, Retailleau's film became the first feature to be screened on D-9 at the Vancouver International Film Festival, also marking the Festival's first foray into the projection of digital formats. Similarly, Ross Weber's *No More Monkeys Jumpin' on the Bed* never made it to film, screening instead on DigiBeta the following year. As a cinematographer, James Tocher proceeded to shoot Simon Capet's short film *Evirati* (1999) which was then transferred to 35mm by Digital Film Group; Tocher's Vancouver company is also responsible for the digital to film transfer of *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)* (2001).

Yet, the significance of Bessai's comments must also be traced to their Toronto context. By the late 1990's, the moniker Toronto New Wave was in its heyday as the descriptor for a group of filmmakers—including (among others) Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, Patricia Rozema and Don McKellar—that has been credited with revolutionizing independent feature filmmaking in Canada.<sup>14</sup> The indigenous industry was enjoying unprecedented exposure and it seemed as though contemporary Canadian cinema was finally in reach of the critical mass that critics and policymakers had been dreaming of for so long. Egoyan and Rozema had recently completed international co-productions while McKellar was enjoying the success of his first feature as a director. Perhaps then, Cameron Bailey's "Secret History of the Toronto New Wave" from *Take One's* Summer 2000 Special Issue on Ontario Cinema can provide some insight into the historical characteristics of this type of movement. Bailey begins with McDonald's manifesto from *Cinema Canada's* 1988 Outlaw Edition in which he stresses the necessity of freedom from the constraints of commercial influences.<sup>15</sup> Although there is not a corresponding west coast proclamation of cinematic independence, Vancouver filmmaking carves out a marginal space for itself in opposition to the thriving production presence of American runaway productions.

At the same time, it is important to note that the Pacific variant of the new wave is more an assertion of regional specificity than an attempt to create a "new Canadian Feature Film;"<sup>16</sup> yet, it could also be argued that counteracting centralist notions of Canadian cinema offers a fresh perspective on

national specificity. Bailey sums up the Toronto New Wave as "urban, intimate, underdog, migrant. Educated and art-fuelled. Not political. Not commercial. And not literary."<sup>17</sup> A similar delineation of the Pacific New Wave would be urban, educated, ensemble-driven, political, local, neo-realist, ambivalent, digital, fragmented, and certainly not commercial. A tentative list of core players would include Bruce Sweeney, Ross Weber, Reg Harkema, Bruce Spangler and cinematographers Bob Aschmann, Brian Johnson, James Tocher and David Pelletier. The list remains both short and tentative as it remains to be seen what will come next from first time helmers like Scott Smith, Marc Retailleau and Davor Marjanovic. An absence of women from this list suggests a boys' club; however, as several BC women are currently in the process of transitioning from shorts to features, membership in this club should soon change.

Just as Bailey points out that the Toronto New Wave favours certain directors at the expense of others, the designation of a Pacific New Wave would likely not include Lynne Stopkewich or Greg Middleton. Despite their significant presence and participation in the local film community, their films do not really correspond to the aforementioned characteristics. The thematic concerns of Stopkewich's films are less specifically local while Middleton brings a more fluid and refined cinematographic style than that of Johnson or Aschmann, both of whom rely less on cranes and dollies as tools for character study.<sup>18</sup> Designating the turn of the millennium as the focal point of Pacific filmmaking also overlooks the contributions through the 1980's and 1990's of Sandy Wilson as well as 1970's indie pioneers Jack Darcus, Larry Kent and Sylvia Spring. Due to these exclusions, the view presented by the Pacific New Wave does not encompass either the full range or historical emergence of independent filmmaking in Vancouver. Meanwhile, looking beyond the Rockies might lead to the inclusion of Gary Burns given that *waydowntown* (2000) provides a dystopic look at Calgary's Plus 15 walkway system; in addition, Burns' *Kitchen Party* (1997) served as a starting point for several BC actors.

Largely drawn from the city's two university film schools, Vancouver's kitchen party attendees remain actively involved in supporting new graduates; however, activity has not coalesced around Cineworks in the same way as the Torontonians gravitated toward LIFT. Ensemble casting is exemplified by Sweeney regulars Tom Scholte, Nancy Sivak, Babz Chula, Ben Ratner and Vincent Gale, several of whom also star in Weber's *No More Monkeys*. Both Sweeney and Weber paint wry portraits of dysfunctional urban interrelationships in which hapless characters negotiate imperfect personal lives that are set against unsatisfying work-lives. For instance, in *No More Monkeys Jumpin' on the Bed*, when Peter discovers that his girlfriend Fiona refuses to end her sexual relationship with a bisexual man, he turns to his ex Claire who is caught up in her own unhappy living arrangements with her boyfriend Lyle; their friends include borderline alcoholic Susan who is unable to succeed either personally or professionally and Rick, the charming womaniser. Meanwhile, *A Girl is a Girl* (1999) maps the trysts of a serial monogamist while *rollercoaster* follows a group of high risk youth who break into an amusement park.

With their disaffected characters and gritty outlook, the Pacific New Wave films react against the use of Vancouver as an attractive Hollywood back lot, stressing instead an ambivalent





response to urban life. In his discussion of *Last Wedding*, Peranson explains that this is "the Vancouver left out of tourist brochures,"<sup>19</sup> thereby providing an inadvertent reminder that the province's first film development office operated "under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism."<sup>20</sup> The dual nature of the city's drug culture encompasses the trendiness and hippiness of marijuana alongside the devastations of HIV in the downtown eastside—a range that corresponds to the recreational drug use of *A Girl is a Girl* and *Dirty* (1998) as well as the ravaging effects of addiction in *We All Fall Down* and *Protection* (2000). In contrast to the charming rural community of *The Lotus Eaters* (1993) or the stunning vistas of *Touched*, these films make unapologetically honest use of Vancouver's spaces, with a particular focus on the downtown core. In the spring of 2002, an overturned, bullet-ridden car graced the steps of the public library for Lucy Liu and Antonio Banderas' new thriller *Ballistic: Ecks vs. Sever* (2002). This grand coliseum-like building also provided the setting for the party scenes in Arnold Schwarzenegger's *The 6<sup>th</sup> Day* (2000). In an innovative move, the beginning of *No More Monkeys* includes a chance run-in between Peter and Clair outside this local landmark where we find out that she works as a librarian. During their brief encounter, they discuss the building's odd architectural presence. Peter points out that, if you look at it a certain way, the library resembles a roll of toilet paper.

It may be due to inattention to capturing a sense of place that Carl Bessai's Vancouver-feature *Lola* (2001) does not seem to fit in with the Pacific New Wave. The urban scenes in the first part of the film distort geographical space in a way that could be jarring to the local viewer. Although *Lola* experiences life in a discontinuous and detached way, it is arguable that Sandra could just as well be saving her from stepping in front

of a TTC streetcar rather than a Translink electric bus. Thus, despite the film's intimate documentary style, that bears lingering traces of the Dogme aesthetic, Bessai's story could easily have been set elsewhere. Conversely, the characters of *Last Wedding* find their lives inescapably shaped by the west coast landscape. Noah, a waterproofing specialist, lives in a leaky condo with his new bride Zipporah, whose love of horses and dream of country music stardom suggest that she hails from outside the lower mainland. The tension over architectural styles between Shane and his girlfriend Sarah, who takes a job at a high-powered firm, evokes anxieties over Vancouver's rapid gentrification; from Yaletown through the old Expo site and into the southern downtown core, the skyline is rapidly being filled up with new condominium high-rises. At one point, Sarah even mentions Vancouver's tendency to disregard the preservation of historical landmarks in favour of new building developments. Not limited to downtown settings, Bruce Spangler's *Protection* provides an exploration of a family torn apart by addiction that effectively captures Surrey's suburban squalor in much the same way that Sweeney's *Dirty* exposes the underbelly of Vancouver life.

Even though Mark Peranson spends a portion of each year living in Vancouver and working at the film festival, it is significant that his *Globe and Mail* article about the Pacific New Wave coincides with the Toronto International Film Festival. Not only does this approach frame west coast filmmaking from a Toronto perspective, the implication is also that national recognition is required to legitimate a regional film scene. Additional coverage, in both national and local newspapers, depicts the arrival of *Last Wedding* stars Molly Parker, Ben Ratner and Tom Scholte at the film's gala screening. Scholte contrasts their limousine ride and red carpet walk with the



1995 presentation of *Live Bait* for which he "and Sweeney had to make their way around Toronto on the TTC...clutching the only [film] print,"<sup>21</sup> thereby making it seem as though the young creative talent from the west had finally officially arrived six years later. These observations are reminiscent of Janine Marchessault's analysis of the Toronto film scene in her article "Film Scenes: Paris, New York, Toronto." Extrapolating from Fredric Jameson's argument that "a national film culture needs its stars in order to take root," Marchessault adds that "it also needs its scenes and its cities, the setting where stars come into being."<sup>22</sup> She proceeds to trace a brief overview of the emergence of the TIFF as an international event that would "outdo the New York Film Festival," while concurrently fostering a thriving local scene.<sup>23</sup>

In this context, Peranson's A-listing of Sweeney along with the Vancouver *Province's* pictorials of western participation at the Toronto festival<sup>24</sup> suggest that the Vancouver scene is filtered through its relationship to Canada's pre-eminent film scene. My intention here is not to suggest that Vancouver's film scene is trapped in the type of "perpetual self-other, centre-margin binary" that Noreen Golfman has associated with "the co-dependent grand narratives of Canadian cultural life."<sup>25</sup> Rather than generating a reductive perspective of west coast filmmaking as rural, it seems instead that scenes are defined in relation to other scenes, whether international as in the case of Toronto with New York or intranational as with Vancouver and Toronto. Yet, it remains interesting that the term Pacific New Wave continues to lack currency on the west coast. Katherine Monk explains that the new Vancouver International Film Centre aspires to satisfy the dual "hopes of revitalizing the south downtown core and bringing the fragmented local film scene together."<sup>26</sup> Over the course of the past several years, the closing of theatres such as the Caprice, Paradise and Vancouver Centre has forced the Film Festival further and further away from the Granville strip, making it increasingly difficult for festival goers to take part in the "[s]eeing and being seen [that] is done at the scene."<sup>27</sup> At its proposed location at the corner of Seymour and Davie streets, the Film Centre will include permanent offices for the VIFF, a multi-format screening venue and office space for local productions.<sup>28</sup>

This project is linked to a residential and commercial development for which Amacon-Omni receives a density bonus as part of a City Council program that "permits developers to increase their on-site density in new construction in exchange for providing a public amenity of a social, recreational or cultural nature."<sup>29</sup> According to Sharon Zukin, the creation of gentrified downtown scenes expand and revitalize the physical landscape in a way that "suggests a diffusion outward from the geographical center of downtown's cultural power."<sup>30</sup> As such, the contingent classificatory value of the Pacific New Wave lies in its ability to unify local filmmaking trends just as the film centre strives to (re)focus an independent scene within a constellation of downtown venues. In this way a local imagined community provides a site for addressing the political and marketing aims of national cinemas by mediating between regional, national and international concerns.

The term new wave ultimately may prove incapable of adequately describing the range of western Canadian film production. In particular, it suggests a break that leaves out the continuing presence of filmmakers like Sandy Wilson and Anne

Wheeler and can't seem to find a space for Lynne Stopkewich; but, the terms also draws a distinction between the overwhelming presence of American runaway production and recent growth in a locally-driven independent film scene. Nevertheless, regardless of discrepancies between the identities of their festivals and the corresponding local scenes, Vancouver's burgeoning cosmopolitanism will unavoidably find itself framed in relation to Toronto. And, even if time is unkind to the terminology and the Pacific New Wave consequently appears to ebb, it is worthwhile to remember that festival programmers tossed around the notion of "new Canadian cinema" in the late 1980's as they attempted to provide a name for what they saw.

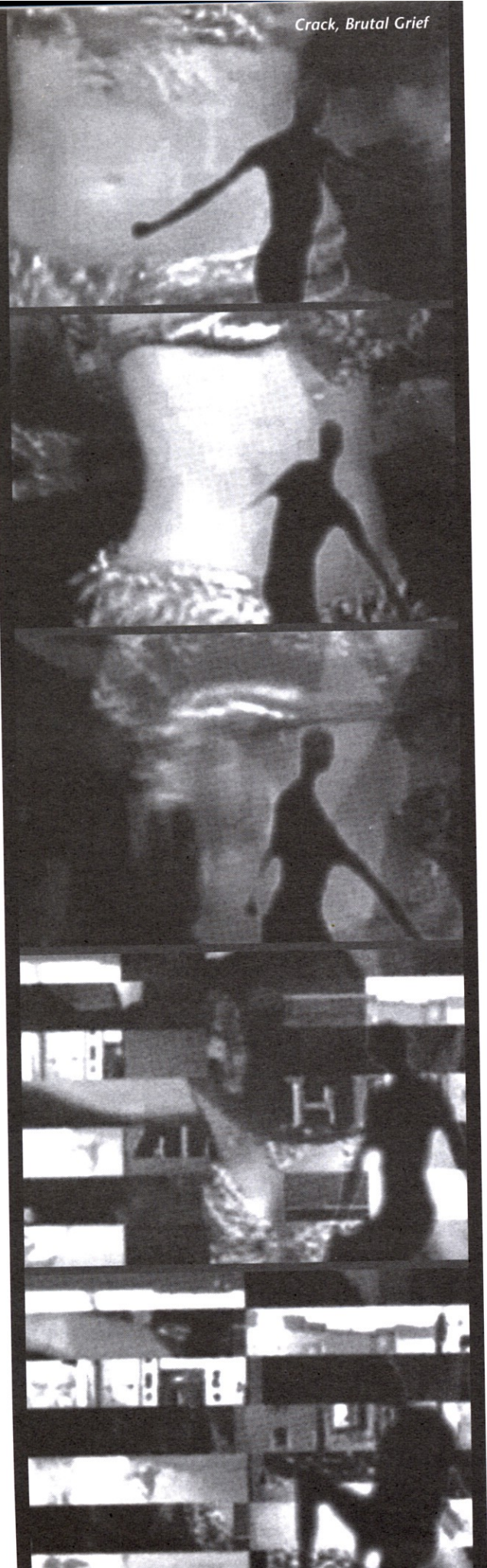
**Diane Burgess** is a PhD candidate at Simon Fraser University and programs the Canadian Images section of the Vancouver International Film Festival.

## Notes

- 1 Ken Anderlini, "A West Coast Nouvelle Vague?," *Film Festival Fresh Sheet* 2 (Oct. 1999): 4.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Diane Burgess and Michael Ghent, "Canadian Images" (Introductory essay), *19th Vancouver International Film Festival* (Fall, 2000): 72.
- 5 Ken Eisner, "New Realism," *The Georgia Straight* (Sept. 14-21, 2000): 18.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Mark Peranson, "Riding the Pacific New Wave," *The Globe and Mail* (Sept. 3, 2001): R1.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Cori Howard, "The Irony of the Anti-blockbuster," *National Post* (Aug. 7, 1999): 4.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Geoff Pevere refers to this movement as the Ontario New Wave in "Middle of Nowhere: Ontario Movies after 1980," *Post Script* 15:1 (Fall 1995): 9-22, while Kass Banning also invokes the term "new wave" in her discussion of Canadian cinema—"Editorial," *CineAction* 28 (1992): 2.
- 15 Cameron Bailey, "Standing in the Kitchen all Night: A Secret History of the Toronto New Wave," *Take One* 9:28 (Summer 2000): 6.
- 16 Ibid. McDonald's manifesto referred to "the creation of the new Canadian Feature Film."
- 17 Ibid., 10.
- 18 Anderlini.
- 19 Peranson.
- 20 Mike Gasher, *Hollywood North: The Feature Film Industry in British Columbia*, Vancouver: UBC Press (2002): 69. Gasher traces the evolution of BC film policy, stressing its predominantly industrial focus. He attributes the drafting of a "comprehensive cultural policy position" to Mike Harcourt's NDP government which took power from the right-leaning Social Credit party in the 1991 election (94).
- 21 Christina Lopes, "Last Wedding's Scholte Basks in Gala Spotlight," [www.globeandmail.com/special/filmfestival](http://www.globeandmail.com/special/filmfestival) (Sept. 7, 2001).
- 22 Janine Marchessault, "Film Scenes: Paris, New York, Toronto" *Public: Cities/Scenes* 22/23 eds. Janine Marchessault and Will Straw (2002): 68.
- 23 Ibid., 72.
- 24 For example: David Spaner, "Objective: Toronto," *The Province* (Sept. 6, 2001): C4. David Spaner, "Big Night for Wedding," *The Province* (Sept. 7, 2001): C2.
- 25 Noreen Golfman, "Imagining Region: A Survey of Newfoundland Film," *North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema Since 1980*, Eds: William Beard & Jerry White, Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press (2002): 47.
- 26 Katherine Monk, "Council Approves New Vancouver Film Centre," *The Vancouver Sun* (Sept. 22, 2001): B4.
- 27 Alan Blum, "Scenes," *Public: Cities/Scenes* 22/23 eds. Janine Marchessault and Will Straw (2002): 14.
- 28 Monk.
- 29 Fiona Hughes, "Film Festival Plans to Open its Own Movie House," *The Vancouver Courier* (Sept. 9, 2001): 26.
- 30 Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* Berkeley: University of California Press (1991): 187.



Crack, Brutal Grief



## AN INTERVIEW WITH **R. Bruce Elder**

by Aysegul Koc

On a cold February night this year, Cinematheque Ontario presented the world premiere of *Eros and Wonder*, R. Bruce Elder's latest experimental film. Being part of the impressed and delighted crowd that night at the Cinematheque, my mind immediately went back to a few months ago, when I saw Elder's prior film *Crack, Brutal Grief* at a screening at Ryerson University. This disturbing work, made up of—footage downloaded from the World Wide Web—deals with the imaginative transformations of found footage, with a deep sense of wretchedness. *Eros and Wonder*, on the other hand, involves other kinds of transformations: that of the creative/vital power, imagery, history/memory and the self. Technically, on a production level, the film also makes use of both electrical and chemical transformations.

Along with *A Man Whose Life Was Full of Woe Has Been Surprised by Joy*, *Crack, Brutal Grief* and *Eros and Wonder* constitute a cycle of films that Elder entitles *The Book of Praise*. Elder's earlier cycle called *The Book of All the Dead* comes from an interest the filmmaker felt, in his words, toward the aesthetic qualities of the Catholic liturgy whereas *The Book of Praise* is influenced by Protestant spirituality, particularly the place of the subject in Protestant thought. As Elder expressed, the withdrawal of the subject from the outer world into itself, the place of imagination and imagination as generative force became the key concerns of *The Book of Praise*. I took the viewer's liberty, and asked Elder questions about his last film based on my vision/interpretation of it, alongside other questions on his work and Canadian cinema.

This interview was made at a time when Bruce Elder was busy programming the Stan Brakhage Memorial Screenings at the Images Festival. He had finished a manuscript of a book on the influence of cinema on shaping the ideals of Futurism, Surrealism, Cubism, Constructivism and Dada. Needless to say, R. Bruce Elder is one of the most productive filmmaker/professor/writer/critics of the Canadian art scene. He probably is one of the few—or the only!—who has a background in applied mathematics and computer science.



**Aysegul Koc:** Starting with the title of your last film, *Eros and Wonder*, there's a passage in your article *Foreignness of the Intimate or the Violence and Charity of Perception* where you talk about *eros*.

A nude implores us to caress; but a caress acknowledges that we cannot close the divide across which the Other resides. In caressing, or in imagining caressing, we acknowledge that erotic relations are not really reciprocal relations as our sense of justice would have us believe. Caresses tell us that *eros* is bound into an unintelligible, unfathomable condition (and so a condition that cannot be reduced to signification), for they tell us that our most profound, most creative ("self-making") relationships are to a being that not only is totally separate, but belongs to a different realm altogether. They tell us, then, that we are most deeply linked to what withdraws from us. (Elder, 21)

I'm curious about the meaning you attribute to 'Eros' and 'Wonder'.

**R. Bruce Elder:** Both the experience of the erotic and the experience of wonder are the experiences of something that calls out from beyond that it reaches down to us into our most intimate being and disrupts our conception of what it is to be a human being. Most of us play some kind of a lip service to the idea that human beings are gentle, decent, loving beings. But the profoundness of the experience reveals something working beyond that, outside of ourselves but which reaches into our inner being and transforms us utterly. But at the same time when we try to grasp the Other that transforms us—or even try to give ourselves over to it, it withdraws from us, we never become entirely at one with the object of either our erotic enthusiasms, or with that which provokes wonder. It remains an Other, or it fails to provoke Eros or Wonder: the more we understand the subject of what we wonder about, the less it seems able to provoke wonder and the more it is converted into something else. There's something of that with the attempt to identify and to possess the object of one's erotic affection, it too withdraws as we try to seize it. There is something paradoxical here—inasmuch as that which reaches into our most intimate being and transforms us most deeply, most inwardly, most personally, remains something alien, something beyond us.

**A.K.** Eroticism as depicted in *Eros and Wonder* is raw, plain and unornamented. It made me think about a primordial state. Instead of aestheticizing the images you made them direct, perhaps as remembered through adolescence.

**R.B.E.** I take it that our most important very early experiences are something very primal. Our first experiences of being held flesh to flesh, skin to skin...I think they are primal and raw. But there's also that sense, the article you were quoting from is devoted to thinking about an element of artwork, is the sense of something in strong works of art that really upsets order, some kind of a principle or force that has the power of disordering form in artwork but also of upsetting perception, of destroying our customary ways of responding, of allowing in something primitive and raw.

**A.K.** Can you talk about some key words that come to my mind when I think about *Eros and Wonder*, like 'delight in tension'? This is a phrase you have used in another context, but seems relevant to *Eros and Wonder* as well.

**R.B.E.** I wanted to provoke the experience of the fascinated consciousness. What I mean by fascinated consciousness, in part, is a consciousness that has experienced time dissolve into timelessness. I think often of the marvellous title of that great Bach cantata, *Gottes Zeit ist die allbeste Zeit* (God's time is the best time of all)—and I imagine that what he meant by *Gottes Zeit* is time that has passed over into timeless. Eliciting the experience of that time is the goal of my work.





I hope, if I do my work well, that when you watch my film, you're entranced—you're not trying to recollect what has happened so far, or trying to figure out how this film is going to end, but are riveted on the present and the sensuous experience of color and movement of texture.

**A.K. Very primal.**

**R.B.E.** Yes, exactly. I think children spend a lot of time in that state of living in the immediate present. Narrative has a harmful way with us in that we are always encouraged to think about where we're headed and how we got to where we are. We begin to live our lives in anticipation and recollection rather than giving ourselves over to sensuous wonder.

**A.K.** Isn't your interest in the raw eroticism also a reaction to, as you have mentioned earlier, the idea that human beings are decent and gentle and loving? Body and the rawness associated with it is something you talk about in *The Body in Film* with reference to filmmakers taking out the not-so-sacred body parts and making them the core of their films.

**R.B.E.** Yes, but I don't know if I make a distinction between the abject and the sacred, between what's considered lowly and base and what is considered to belong to the realm of the holy. In fact it is that very proximity of the sacred to all that is humble, rejected, despised, condemned that fascinates me. We like to think that sacred exists in very prettified forms that you can see in the most delicate of circumstances but in fact the sacred has traditionally been associated with blood rituals, with what's despised and lowly, with what provokes the terror of the abject. The sacred teaches us about death, decay, dejection, despondency, the despised.

**A.K.** The abject and the rejected is something you associate with 'the cinema we need' in your article "Foreignness of the Intimate or the Violence and Charity of Perception":

Thinking-through-rhythm acknowledges the future is for the lowly, for time will raise them. Thinking-through-rhythm discloses that abjection and destitution lie closer to being than do the vaunted and the celebrated. That proximity accounts for the redemptive power of the outcast and the rejected; and that proximity also explains why a humble cinema, a *cinema povera* (a better name for the "experimental cinema") is needed.

**Maybe we could talk about the role of the rejected and the outcast in your films/cinema.**

**R.B.E.** You're absolutely right I think in identifying this one element in the representation of the body because these aren't prettified representations of the body—certainly not in the later work. The representations I have made are generally raw and troubled. How could it be otherwise: the body in Western culture has been treated in many different ways. One can speak with some accuracy of a widespread contempt for the body in modern European culture.

But also, it is not just the representations of the body that suggests my interest in a humble cinema, in a *cinema povera*. More important, I should think, are the use of humble forms, humble forms that suggest what's broken, what's incomplete, what's fragmented, damaged. My films do not provide a prettified surface—they don't trade in the perfected forms of the narrative cinema, they don't furnish the smooth and seamless structure of dominant cinema. They consort with what's broken, hurt and damaged, in pieces.

**A.K.** And that's how you define your work?

**R.B.E.** Yes, very much so.





**A.K.** How about Canadian cinema? Would you call Canadian cinema a humble cinema?

**R.B.E.** We've had filmmakers I would consider to belong to a 'cinema povera', yes. As examples I would offer such people as David Rimmer and Richard Kerr. But I think recently the tremendous enthusiasm for applying the model of the European art film to Canadian cinema has shifted the Canadian cinema in another direction.

I think we relatively went through an austere patch in late 80s and the 90s, when an ironic mode of filmmaking—and in art generally—began to seize people's imagination. I think these works were very much subject to the tyranny of the 'cool', one doesn't want to be seen as too passionate; one mustn't reveal religious or spiritual sensibilities—instead one is smart, cool, distanced. So the filmmaking of the 80s and 90s interested me much less—it affected me much less deeply—than films made from the 60s to the early 80s. This led me to withdraw my attention from the contemporary experimental film and to undertake historical studies.

Things have changed over the last few years, however. There are a number of new, young filmmakers whose work I think is extraordinary.

**A.K.** Going back to your film, *Eros and Wonder*, I was fascinated by the juxtapositions of flesh against the city and its solid constructions, the bodyscape against the cityscapes.

**R.B.E.** There are levels to each of those surely. There are cold concrete forms, modern Berlin, and there's also architecture that's friendlier, that's more curvilinear, more humane. Then in between the world of civilization and the world of our body, there's the realm of nature. Nature too, is presented variously: sometimes in a wilder state, sometimes in a more controlled state—there are wild forests, but there are also vineyards, with vines in neat rows and carefully pruned.

**A.K.** It's interesting how you make use of Germany and especially Berlin, which is a city in ruins, constantly under construction, constantly reconstructed. It's one of the saddest cities of the world.

**R.B.E.** I don't think anybody goes to Berlin without experiencing ghosts. I must say it was even more so in the early 80s when I began going to Berlin. Now it's increasingly transformed into a city that could be almost anywhere in the world. Nonetheless, however compromised its internationalism may be, one has to acknowledge that the art scene in Berlin is one of the most exciting in all of Europe. And I find the political climate by and large extremely progressive—every one I meet is on the left (though of course, the sample I meet is undoubtedly skewed).

**A.K.** Why Germany?

**R.B.E.** Because for me it's a kind of phantasy or imaginary place—or more exactly, a place. In the first place where fantasy and reality meet. When I was growing up Germany was a fairy tale country, the country of the Brothers Grimm—but remember, you can still take trips through Grimm country, from Hesse, along the Weser River, to Bremen. (Talk about a merging of fantasy and reality!) A little later, I memorized a lot of German romantic poetry. Still later, though still a boy, I studied classical music, that is studied the works of composers with names like Johann Sebastian Bach, or Georg Frideric Handel, or Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf, or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, or Arnold Schönberg, or Alban Berg. Then I read philosophy—books by people with names like Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger and in particular, read of fabled goings-on in Jena and Weimar. Is it any wonder that to me Germany seemed to me a place of poets, of deep thinkers—not that that represents Germany accu-



rately, I am not saying this is Germany but it became that for me.

But I didn't shoot the entire film in Germany—there is quite a lot of imagery from California as well.

**A.K.** Could you talk about the rhythm of *Eros and Wonder* and also the choreography of sound, text and image?

**R.B.E.** *Eros and Wonder* was put together differently than any other film I've ever made. My co-filmmaker and I did the image, the text that appears as supertitles, and the sound separately—the sound and the image were not matched up until the print was made. One element that helps draw the sound is the text: it appears as both image (supertitles) and sound (through the voice synthesizer). I had rough times for when certain lines appeared in the image—and the reading by the voice synthesizer was loosely—very, very loosely—co-ordinated to that. However we didn't try to exactly synch the computer voice with on-screen text—so sometimes the spoken text appears some considerable time before the written text appears, sometimes it appears just before the written text appears, and sometimes it is heard right after the written text is presented, sometimes it appears a long time after the written text is presented, and sometimes the sound and the written text appear just about the same time. There's a sliding relationship between the sound and the image—the appearance of sound would either cue you that it would appear in the image relatively soon or would remind you it had just appeared in the image. Sometimes the appearance of a line in the audio would follow its appearance in the image, sometimes it would anticipate it, sometimes (by accident) they would appear just about the same time.

Aside from that relation, the audio and the image were done quite separately—we didn't try to “match” the sound and image. The sound and the image were conceived as having equal claim on the temporal space that is the film's duration. The sound and the image each occupy that space in its own (I suppose that's what it means to have equal claim on the film's duration). There is no hierarchy of sound over image or image over sound; and neither should be subordinated to the other.

There are three elements on the soundtrack: the text (the poem) spoken by the voice synthesizer; the electronic sound; the quotations from pieces of music, by composers from the cities, towns and villages that are depicted in the film. The Romantic music that you hear was all music written by composers that lived in the German towns and villages that you see in the film, during the Romantic era. I hope that provokes in viewers some of the sense of wonder I feel in places like Jena and Weimar. The electronic sound is of two types: one type is sound composed by Alex Geddie for the film: he wrote a script that analyzed certain features of the poem that appears in the film—that counted the frequency of vowels in passages, that counted the average length of words in particular passages, and used the numbers he got to control parameters of the sounds he generated. The other type of electronic sound was simply sound controlled to fit with the electronic sound that was controlled by the text parameters, with the sound of voice synthesizer, and with the Romantic music.

**A.K.** You used computer programs for your film.

**R.B.E.** I wrote computer programs for the film, that we used when making it. We used chance operations in deciding how

the images will be processed. A lot of the film was done by sequences of images and then loaded them into a database, which also contained information about various image processing methods. We trained the application which image processing methods were appropriate for certain “reference” images; then the application choose which image processing methods to apply to the images by measuring the similarity between the target images (the images to be processed) and the reference images—target images that closely resembled the reference images were treated with processing methods similar to those that application had been taught where appropriate.

Thus the application used measures of image similarity to constrain the aleatory processes that were used to choose the image processing methods that were applied to the images. I suspect that many other computer programmers are like me, that when they write a computer program, they give it a folksy name while it is under development. In this case, the folksy name I gave the program was “The Cagey One,” because I was certainly working with Cagean compositional methods. Cage—or rather Cage's collaborations with Merce Cunningham—influenced my conception of the duration of film as a field of time, on which image and sound have equal claim, a field of time that can be filled with an autonomous image structure and an autonomous sound structure that are not co-ordinated the one with one another.

The film incorporates various sorts of chance: there are the constrained random choices this application makes concerning the image processing methods to be applied to images; there are the chance relations between image and sound; and there are the chance effects that are produced by processing the film by hand. You understand, I hope, that for me, chance means selflessness—and more than that: “Alles, was wir Zufall nennen, ist von Gott [All that we call chance comes from God],” Novalis said.

The processing—both the digital processing and the hand processing—result in varying degrees of abstraction: sometimes the images show us the world, sometimes they seem more like abstract forms. One could consider this in another way: the film offers a series of transformations—some of the transformations leave the image in a state close to the original, some change it so radically that the image is an image which cannot be discerned. Our response to this is curious: sometimes we long to hold onto what the image represents, and when it is lost, when it recedes behind those transformations, we are sad; but equally, we long to hold onto the abstract forms that the transformations produce, and when the representation comes to the fore, we mourn the loss of the abstraction. Thus, the subject of the film is what is gained, and what is lost, through these transformations: while we appreciate the ultimate richness such transformations bring, we also mourn what is lost in the process.

The presentation of the poem—in image and sound—is somewhat similar: at times the text is readable/audible, and at times it is not. We can appreciate it as pure sound—but at the cost of meaning; or we can appreciate its meaning, but then our appreciation of it as pure sound diminishes.

**A.K.** How do you see yourself as a Canadian filmmaker? In *Image and Identity* you're talking about a need to move away from defining the national culture through oppositional conception of being the ‘Other’ of the US and towards what you



call a genetic approach.

**R.B.E.** I think the whole issue of the national identity is a very complex, convoluted one and undoubtedly national enthusiasms had a rather dreadful history in 20<sup>th</sup> century. That being said, I am not sure that there cannot be positive nationalisms. One reason for suggesting that there are possibilities to the national idea, it seems to me that it has a possibility of counteracting the spread of insidious American ideas. For me the great threat in the world in the last fifty years has been America. I think a struggle against American hegemony is the most important struggle of our times.

**A.K.** When you say 'genetic approach', doesn't it provoke that kind of a danger of homogeneity?

**R.B.E.** It has that potential and that has to be guarded against very, very scrupulously. At the same time it seems to me it's a danger that can be overcome by recognizing that any culture is organic, that it evolves. A culture evolves partly by assimilating differences but at the same time as it's taking in differences, that those differences get accommodated to a main mind of historical development. I don't know that it's insidious to say, that there's been a French culture that is distinct from a German culture. Importantly it is distinct from American culture.

**A.K.** There's a dilemma here, because you're saying 'let's not define Canadian national identity' in a 'compare/contrast' with the US but then the American hegemony is so strong.

**R.B.E.** I'm worried that we are evolving towards the condition of a universal homogenous state. The character of that state is increasingly defined by American ideology. The universal homogenous state entails various sorts of tyrannies and losses of liberty. It will level the differences between cultures and the differences amongst individuals; already we see the tyranny that is exercised over those who do not speak on behalf of the culture industries. The universal homogeneous will be a culture of greater and greater conformity. It will have no place for philosophy, no place for deep thought. It may well have no place for art.

Do I think we should define ourselves against the US? I think that's always the wrong way to turn. Identities defined in terms of oppositions are always harmful. I think what we need to do is to ask ourselves to remember our history and maintain our historical identities. There's a tremendous challenge however because as soon as one says 'we have to remember our historical identities', one is confronted by the danger of backward looking nationalisms based on ethnicities that are absolutely abhorrent. Remember that in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, the idea of a nation-state, of a state established to protect and to further the interest of a national group (usually understood in ethnic terms) was the norm. So a nationalism based on history can be abhorrent. The question is, whether it must be. And my answer is that it need not: that there is the possibility of a nationalism that can acknowledge sufficiently the centrifugal forces that bind people together in a deep whole, yet is not closed to influences from outside itself—that can take in differences and allow itself to be transformed by them. Yet at the same is sufficiently well-defined as an autonomous being that it offers resistance to the spread of the universal, homogeneous state.

**Aysegul Koc**, [aysegul@yorku.ca](mailto:aysegul@yorku.ca), is an MA candidate at the Department of Film and Video, York University. She is the Toronto correspondent of *Altıyazi*, a monthly film magazine published in Istanbul, Turkey.



*Surprised by Joy*



# Beyond the Homeland

## A COMPARATIVE INTRODUCTION TO LATINO FILM IN CANADA AND THE U.S.

by Elena Feder

In comparison to parallel areas of scholarly inquiry into the history and aesthetics of marginalized identity formations—Feminist, Queer, or Black and Native American—Latinø Film Studies is a relative newcomer to the North American academic scene. To date practically non-existent in Canada, it began to be constituted as a field of study in the United States only as recently as the mid-1980s, largely in conferences and film society meetings. The use of the term “Latino”, to designate a culturally, economically, ethnically, racially, and nationally diverse set of people according to (loosely) shared linguistic and cultural traditions, dates back approximately to the late 1960s in the U.S., and is only recently beginning to be used in this sense in this country.<sup>1</sup>

As with other subnational-identity markers defined in opposition to any dominant national-identity formation, “Latino” glosses over the widely-divergent historical trajectories of the people subsumed under the term: differences among Latinos are at least as ample as they are among “Anglos” within and between Canada and the United States or, for that matter, in any other ex-colony of Great Britain or the United States where English remains the predominant language.<sup>2</sup>

As the *Ur* marker of difference, gender distinctions complicate this picture even further as they affect each and every one of the above categories. Both long-term resistance and adaptation to colonization, as in the case of Chicanos and Nuyoricans (New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent) in the United States, and the more short-term experience of exile, dislocation, and integration of Latinøs in Canada, are lived and articulated differently by the sexes.<sup>3</sup> Their relation to language and translation is also different. Since gender is marked differently in Spanish than in English, I will use the neologism Latinø rather than the more common and cumbersome Latino/a. Imported from yet another alphabet, the letter “Ø” stands here as a marker of a politics and a poetics of deconstruction, both always already underpinned by gender and difference—in the philosophical sense of meanings that are both “different” and “deferred,” and in the sense of the multi-faceted social, political, economic, historical, and cultural contexts that serve difference and deferral as backdrop and ground.<sup>4</sup>

Thus before the umbrella term “Latinø-Canadian cinema” can become constituted as an object of knowledge in this country, its mere existence as a specific practice with a singular history and particular conditions of production first needs to be recognized. I hope that this comparative overview of the field on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border will help readers situate the contributions of the Latinø-Canadian film and video makers whose work is discussed.

### Hispanics, Latinøs, and the W(r)est

In both the U.S. and Canada, “Hispanic” and “Latino” are widely used to refer to people of Latin American, Caribbean, and Spanish descent. While the socio-economic history of each of these terms





is substantially different on the two sides of the forty-ninth parallel, they share many common traits. In both cases, these terms are intended to identify a "minority" group with cultural and racial characteristics different from those of the "majority" and that are implicitly associated with inferior social status and limited political power. Both terms tend to erase the historical, political, and socio-economic histories of the groups concerned, while obscuring their different albeit inter-related realities. The position of Argentinian-born, U.S. sociologist Martha E. Giménez, both exemplifies and sheds more light on this problem:

Divisions in terms of national origin, social class, ethnicity, race, length of stay in the U.S., and so forth make it exceedingly problematic to find common cultural denominators in this population beyond the language. And even the language itself divides, for each Latin American country has its own version of Spanish, which is itself divided by region, class, ethnicity, race, etc. Just as heterogeneous are the populations of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Spanish descent living in this country, in which the younger generations have at best a superficial knowledge of Spanish.<sup>5</sup>

A consensus is slowly building to differentiate "Hispanic" and "Latino" on the basis of ideological tendencies or social, economic, political, and class histories, even though inclusion in either category will vary according to class and/or political affiliation. Cuban-Americans, for example, are only recently beginning to be included in left-leaning definitions of Latino. Hispanic, the older of the two terms, largely grew out from the assimilationist aspirations of middle class and professional immigrants to the United States and Canada, both of whom perceive their integration into society as contingent on the

acquisition of institutional, economic, or political power through the attainment of homogeneity with an ideal national mean.<sup>6</sup> In both countries, Hispanic has functioned as an official census category and has surfaced at every level in educational and other institutional settings, often reflecting more than simply a linguistic bias when Spain and immigrants of Spanish descent are added to an already unwieldy mix. The emergence of "Latino," as a by-product of the radical movement politics of the 1960s, signals a departure from middle class assimilationism towards a more radical assertion of cultural and/or ethnic difference. Avoiding hierarchical inversions of value, most Latino-U.S. scholars who attempt to define the term today underscore its constructed and contradictory nature and, while engaging in a de-centering process of self-definition, acknowledge its potential effectiveness as tool of cultural intervention. Film scholars Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, whose introduction to *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts* remains to date the most lucid analysis of the subject, suggest that this requires us to look simultaneously to both the future and the past: "to look ahead to a future moment when 'Latino' works might be fully integrated into ... established [narrative, documentary, and experimental] modes and thereby become open to a broader range of inter- and intratextual associations," while at the same time approaching Latino media arts "through the matrix of [the] differential [yet interrelated] histories" within and between which these texts fluctuate — "the ethnic or subnational (Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban American); the interethnic and interminority (relations across communities of gender, race, sexuality and so on); the panethnic or national category for minorities (Latino, Hispanic); the mainstream or national (American [or Canadian]); and the hemispheric or international (Latin American)."<sup>7</sup>



Most social, literary, and media historians coincide in including a number of constitutive events bracketed by the two main poles of the Conquest and the struggles of farm workers, student, and civil rights activists in the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond. These include the 1898 Spanish-American War (when Spain lost the colonies of Cuba and Puerto to the United States); the unremitting violations of citizenship rights inscribed in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (which legally consolidated Mexico's loss of about half of its territory to its northern neighbour); the Vietnam War (when a disproportionate number of Black and Latino minorities were sent overseas and killed); the Cold War and its attendant Third World anti-colonial and class struggles; the forced immigration of thousands of political refugees as a result of U.S. imperial policies throughout the Americas since the 1930s; and the influx of economic migrants and professionals who have chosen to relocate to the North for a variety of personal reasons.<sup>8</sup> Given that people of Cuban descent constitute the third largest group of Latinos in the U.S., the Cuban Revolution has also come to represent a unique and particularly complex point of historical reference.<sup>9</sup>

The assignation of the term "Latino" to the otherwise overlooked work by film, video, and other media artists of Latin American and Caribbean descent is thus fraught with the kinds of contradictions that are bound to arise from such a long and complex history. Noriega and López make the ironic observation that in the United States the Latino intelligentsia has sought social and political change through the discursive articulation of an ethnically distinct collective identity, even though Latino media artists in general (but especially those whose work reflects a concern with post-1960s issues of identity and self-representation) "have rarely ever made 'Latino' works, preferring instead to work at the level of either the subnational or the national itself, speaking either as ethnics or as Americans to both their communities and the nation." In other words, working with and against the realization that "Latino media arts is a category based on exclusion alone, a mere catchall for the overlooked works by artists who happen to be of Latin American and Caribbean descent," this generation of US-Latino activists, scholars, and media artists (a generation who came of age during the grassroots and civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s) focused on gaining access to the mass media, in order to affirm representation and to affect the production of meaning at the national level.<sup>10</sup>

### Artistic output and pan-ethnic pigeon-holing

The use of biologically determined and subtly racist assignations like Hispanic or Latino are not simply what Noriega and López define as the "product of a racial politics played out at the national level."<sup>11</sup> Due to the increasing dominance of U.S. mass media worldwide, they have also had a strong impact at the supranational and global levels, often with opposite or contradictory effects. Equally ironic is the fact that films like *El Norte*, *La Bamba*, *American Me*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *Mi Familia*, which in U.S. film history stand as examples of the short but significant "Latino Hollywood" chapter, become "American" films when projected abroad. As a result, they end up bearing all the implications of empire and the forms of desire Hollywood films elicit, including the misconceived notion that success and access to power are equally available to their ego-idealized heroes and heroines, regardless of their

darker skin. The marketing of this semblance of homogeneity with the national mean, voided of social and political content and historical referents in the process of both production and consumption, is one of the reasons why not only stereotyped images of Latinos but the term itself travel with ease across radically different Euro-American contexts. The fact that the differences that exist both between and within all subnational groups are rarely taken into account has had considerable consequences. More often than not, umbrella terms like Latino end up disempowering more than enabling the populations they denote. Be it in the name of adding new colours to a multicultural quilt or reifying originary differences while diluting them in an already overheated melting pot, their use strengthens racial stereotypes, lead to social strategies and economic policies that exacerbate the ghettoizing of marginalized identity formations, and foster questionable forms of desire and abjection which end up circulating freely in the written and visual vernacular of the day.

One of the more serious dangers of identifying either creative or critical output on the basis of ethnic or pan-ethnic pigeonholing is that it provides a rationale for isolating and shielding artistic output from critical scrutiny and comparative formal or theoretical analyses. Multiculturalist policies and newly developed strategies of intercultural exchange notwithstanding, at this historical juncture, Latino-Canadians of all social, economic and ideological stripes are left with little choice but to turn into "Native" or "Third World" informants, thereby becoming *de facto* representatives of the un- or under-represented.<sup>12</sup> Latin American artists who migrate to the North are surprised to find themselves automatically divested of their national identity, as they become identified with artists in other subnational groups nationals with whom they often have little in common other than a basic form of the language and a vaguely defined sense of a common Latin American heritage. Severed from their interpretive communities and traditional sources of creativity and financial support, they find themselves forced to straddle cultural divides and to diversify their locations of address in order to reflect the fragmentation of their subject positions. This adds a new spin to an established axiom in the politics of recognition, which wrongly assumes that acknowledgement and recognition are sought solely from the dominant culture, rather than from cultures on all sides of the kaleidoscopic Imaginary that both reflects and refracts pluricultural identity formations. Although right in other respects, Charles Taylor subscribes implicitly to this view in the concluding pages of his *Multiculturalism and the "Politics of Recognition"*:

The peremptory demand for favorable judgements of worth is paradoxically—perhaps one should say tragically—homogenizing. For it implies that we already have the standards to make such judgements. The standards we have, however, are those of North Atlantic civilization. And so the judgements implicitly and unconsciously will cram the others into our categories.... By implicitly invoking our standards to judge all civilizations and cultures, the politics of difference can end up making everyone the same.<sup>13</sup>

Sensing the need to break through the imposition of such standards, film and other media artists have availed themselves of a range of established and experimental modes of visual



expression, resorting to textual strategies of hybridization (such as mixing genres, styles, cultural and aesthetic codes, and spoken and musical languages) with a view to addressing a non-homogeneous audience—one of diverse, and often conflicting, constituencies and communities of origin. These strategies have allowed them to form inter- and extra-textual alliances with several interpretive communities and, in the best of cases, to resist having their work simplified due to a reductive view of ethnicity, gender, and national or subnational identity. For example, Claudia Morgado's experimental short film *Sabor a mí* (*Savour me*, Canada 1997) has become both a classic Latinø-Canadian film and a cult film in U.S. and Canadian lesbian circles, despite its Spanish title and the use of little-known Latinø actors, Latin American music, and pictorial excess as overriding referents. If the growing North American success of Latinø art, music, film and other media arts is any indication, then speaking from the margins does not need to be considered an impediment in today's context. Indeed, as Ana López points out,

Exile has become a fashionable position from which to 'speak.' Empowered by modern practices that proclaim the decentredness of contemporary capitalist life and by postcolonial theories of discourse that privilege the hybridity and ambivalence of exile (both inside and outside, belonging yet foreign) as a significant site from which to challenge the oppressive hegemony of the 'center' or the 'national' the exilic experience — along with borders, margins, and peripheries — has become a central metaphor of contemporary multicultural artistic and critical practices.<sup>14</sup>

It is in light of such opportunities and challenges that Noriega and López, who identify themselves as Chicano and Cuban-American, respectively, have chosen to politicize the term "Latino" by defining it as "a form of panethnic politics designed to redefine the national for the benefit of the specific ethnic groups subsumed under that term."<sup>15</sup> At the crossroads of rapidly changing social and cultural movements, their call to practice "a willful ambivalence about critical location, textual classification, and spectatorship/reception—in short, about the need to name," should be read as an invitation to consider both the dangers and opportunities that such a practice would entail—over and beyond merely U.S.-Latinø interests, and regardless, or perhaps because, of their potential impact worldwide.

#### From Bananas to Bandanas

The history of both Canadian and U.S. Latino film practice is, in great part, a reflection of the progressive integration and resistant adaptation by the conquered and colonized (and the thousands of economic and ideological migrants, exiles, and refugees from South America, Mexico and the Caribbean), both to each other and to the nation. In Canada this history can only be traced back to the arrival of the first wave of Chilean political refugees following the overthrow of the Allende government in the early 1970s, whereas U.S. Latinø film history is rooted in a social and cultural formation that spans over 150 years, with Chicano, Puerto Rican and Cuban filmmakers as the three majoritarian subnational groups.<sup>16</sup> The first generation (late 1960s to early 1980s) of Chicano filmmakers and other cultural workers focused on the exclusion of images of

Latinos from the Hollywood screen. Spearheaded by filmmaker and theorist Jesús Salvador Treviño, the radicalism of this generation was inflected by the films and manifestos of the New Latin American Cinema, including the nearly total absence of women from their scene.<sup>17</sup> In the mid-1980s the focus changed to issues of self-representation and spectatorship, drawing on more than twenty years of work by Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican cultural workers, on the growing importance of feminist film theory and practice, and on the progressive spread of Third Cinema to include marginal cinemas in the developed world. Since then, not only the Chicano, but also Canadian and US Latinø cinemas have followed a trajectory that continues to bring them into direct negotiation with Hollywood and, to a lesser extent, Mexican and other cinemas in the Spanish-speaking world.<sup>18</sup>

In a departure from the movement politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the current generation favours a more personal exploration of the limits and possibilities of specific artistic practices and the immediate and wider contexts within which these are deployed. Noriega and López identify this shift as an undercurrent throughout the essays in their collection, describing it as follows:

Whereas an intermediate generation of scholars, working under the umbrella of cultural studies, sought to reform Latino cultural nationalism by divesting it of its patriarchal, homophobic privileged agency, the new generation is more likely to be critical of the underlying nationalist premises themselves—that is, of the discourses of belonging. In many ways, this produces critical work that oscillates between a number of disciplinary locations—body-specific (ethnic, gender, queer), media-specific (film, video, multimedia), and discourse-specific (genre, identity, reception—without a secure mooring in any one camp (ix).

#### The proof is in the Salsa

In the production of a shifting subject-effect that is neither singular nor plural, yet both at one and the same time, Noriega and Lopez's rhetorical strategy differs significantly from W.E.B. Dubois and Franz Fanon's well-known articulations of the double consciousness that individual people of colour are forced to internalize.<sup>19</sup> The singularity of a shifting I/we Latinø subject formation, articulated directly and indirectly in the *The Ethnic Eye*/I's textual operations, rests as much upon a post-1968 understanding of cultural-political militancy as upon a post-modern Neo-Baroque Latinø aesthetics, seasoned in the process of this double axis of transculturation with an excessive, campy performative humor. Framing the struggle for Latinø representation in film and television against the background of the history of Latinø social and political struggle, moreover, *The Ethnic Eye* squarely situates the radicalized speaking subject at eye-level with the community that he/she speaks for. Transparency in the articulation of a rhetorical choice also sketches the lineaments of a shifting ideological and discursive formation within a culture-specific chronotope, as it did for Fanon. The strategic aim is to embed the lineaments of a shifting discursive formation into a culture-specific chronotope so as to enable the simultaneously singular and plural subject to be seen in the process of breaking away from the imposition of an amnesia-inducing Otherness—be it through the repressive mediation of stereotyping or, even





worse, through erasure by censorship.<sup>20</sup>

What emerges from the displacement of this "monocular" (to coin another neologism) subject of speech by the iconoclastic I/we speaking subject threatening its cohesiveness off-set and off-screen, is the discursive gambit of a simultaneously singular and plural "*Latinø*" *subject of the enunciation*—a subject that is sufficient unto itself yet provisional, firmly grounded in a history of activism and a shifting politics of location that is both playfully serious and perversely aware of the arbitrary and provisional nature of power, including its own. In fact, it is by characterizing their underlying critical strategy as "perversity" that Noriega and López end their introduction, defining it as precisely "the contrariness of refusing fixity, essences, secure locations, singular affiliations"<sup>21</sup>—an unusual, not to mention challenging, place from which to participate in, and hopefully avoid the pitfalls of, the academic debate on identity politics indeed.<sup>22</sup> This radical departure from the dominant politics of multiculturalism and its homogenizing implications, the refusal of fixity in all respects represents a crucial de-essentializing move for, in looking simultaneously to the past, present and future, that is, in de-instrumentalizing time, it creates de conditions of visibility for a different social subject: a subject in process, dialogically involved in the (trans)formation of hegemonic thought.

### The other Other Canadians

Whereas U.S. *Latinøs* trace their history back to the Conquest and are expected to become the largest group of minorities in the U.S. in a few years, Canadians with *Latinø* ancestry become

identifiable as a subnational group only in the early 1970s, and they still represent a negligible fraction of the population. Nevertheless, a large percentage of them have been actively involved in practically every aspect of film production since arriving in Canada either as political refugees or economic migrants. Working alongside a variety of other media and visual artists, *Latinø*-Canadian directors, producers, cinematographers, actors, set designers, and so on have produced a substantial body of work. Their contribution to Canadian film history, however, remains to be recognized, let alone critically examined or understood. Although similar concerns and issues of realpolitik have influenced the trajectories of the U.S. and *Latinø*-Canadian cinemas, until very recently *Latinøs* in Canada have had little representation at either the national or regional levels. However, taking into account the support offered to *Latinø* filmmakers by the National Film Board and to *Latinø* curators by the Canada Council and regional funding bodies over the last thirty-five years, it appears that lack of representation has less to do with institutional resistance than with a patchwork politics of identity geared to absorbing cultural differences into a loosely defined national multiculturalism, and also with the fact that Canadian public institutions have little control over the means of distribution of film and the other media arts.

This is not to say that *Latinøs* involved in the industry have not encountered racism in both its overt and subtle forms. Nor does the acknowledgement of institutional support on the basis of panethnic assignments negate the potential for homogenization that lies behind the aim to assimilate new-



comers into the Canadian multicultural quilt. In the absence of a long and complex, social, artistic, and critical trajectory, Latino-Canadian cultural production (which is not to deny the existence of many fine artists in every conceivable field),<sup>23</sup> Latino-Canadian artists struggling for recognition remain subject to a double marginalization by the "dominant" national culture—however elusive and conflicted it itself may be, given Canadian cinema's own self-perception as marginal to Hollywood and the U.S. mass media.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, if we look at Latino-Canadian film from a perverse perspective, in the sense outlined above, we can begin identifying conditions and areas of opportunity historically available to Latinos in this country and, consequently, to re-appropriate the label in order to further our ever-changing goals.

In film and video, two main Latino-Canadian tendencies can be discerned at this time, each broadly equivalent to the two largest waves of immigration of people of Latin American and Caribbean descent to this country. Yet the generational model can be misleading, as there are younger filmmakers whose work resembles tendencies of the first wave and older filmmakers whose work points to directions yet to be explored by the younger generation. As mentioned before, the first generation of Latino filmmakers is overwhelmingly composed of Chileans who immigrated to Canada in the seventies and who form part of the larger Chilean exile-cinema movement worldwide.<sup>25</sup> The second wave consists of younger Latinos who were either born in Canada or immigrated as children or young adults, as well as newcomers from Mexico, the Caribbean, and more recently Central and South America (especially Colombia and Argentina).<sup>26</sup>

Largely oblivious to the homogenizing pitfalls of a politics of recognition, both generations of Latino-Canadian film and video makers reflect Canada's multicultural policies, which invite assimilation to a loosely held together *bricolage* model of national identity that encourages the preservation of culture-specific traditions and practices, yet does not create the necessary conditions of visibility that are a precondition to any kind of integration. In addition, both generations of film and video makers address themselves to several audiences: their communities of origin; a community of immigrants with shared yet different experiences of exile, assimilation, and discrimination; their host communities of choice; and, in a handful of recent cases, to a wider national audience. While there are several overlapping features in the work produced by the two generations of film and other media artists, differences in aesthetic approach and narrative strategy reflect their different degrees of assimilation and levels of investment in local and global cultural capital.

Influenced by two decades of the then vibrant New Latin American Cinema movement, the films of the first generation subscribe to the early avantgarde and Third Cinema axiom of the inseparability of art and politics, as well as to the latter's enticement to experiment with aesthetics, narrative, and performance in an ongoing dialogue with historically-specific conditions of spectatorship and socio-cultural contexts. Unlike their U.S. counterparts, however, their involvement with the means of distribution and consumption has not taken on the form of a movement politics seeking access to representation beyond the institutional level (e.g., the National Film Board or arts councils). Similarly, although their films were exhibited in a handful of festivals in Canada and in college and university

settings and film festivals abroad, like their U.S. counterparts media artists of this generation rarely identify themselves or their work as Latino, let alone as Latino-Canadian.

The films of this generation draw largely on the often tragic, personal experiences of survivors of the national and international political events of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. In the case of Latin America, these were defined in terms of the class struggle, with the aspirations of the left being eventually crushed by the most brutal military dictatorships the continent had ever seen. Addressing a common concern with the impact of exile and assimilation on their personal and extended family lives, these filmmakers deal mostly with the contradictions inherent to this experience: left-wing intellectuals being forced to learn manual skills in order to get a job (Jorge Fajardo, *Steel Blues*, a documentary fiction, 1975); the isolation and exploitation of illegal migrant workers (Leutén Rojas' documentary fiction, *Canadian Experience*, 1978) and Luis Oswaldo García and Toni Venturi's documentary, *Under the Table*, 1983); or the frustrations of a relationship lacking a shared language and cultural codes. (Leopoldo Gutiérrez, *It's Not the Same In English*, 1985).

Not surprisingly, the question of memory emerges as one of the primary concerns of this largely Chilean group of Latino-Canadian filmmakers. Leutén Rojas's *I Remember Too* (1975), a lyrical investigation of the impact of the 1973 events on the lives of young children of political refugees (rendered through their drawings and off-screen voices), is the earliest treatment of this topic. Looking at Chile from a later perspective, *Récits d'une guerre quotidienn/Memoirs of an Everyday War*, 1986, by Gaston Ancelovici and Jaime Barrios, documents the different forms of resistance to the Pinochet government leading up to the referendum that would eventually topple his regime. It remains one of the earliest examples of the returning-exile perspective on Chile by a Latino-Canadian filmmaker.<sup>27</sup>

A classic of this period, a work on memory, is the trilogy *Il n'y a pas d'oubli* (There Is No Forgetting. NFB, 1975), directed by Marilú Mallet ("J'explique certaines choses"), Jorge Fajardo ("Steel Blues"), and Rodrigo Gonzáles, ("Lentement"). Each segment of the trilogy deals with different aspects of the contradictions faced by Chilean refugees suddenly thrown into the socio-political context of a Quebec still reeling from the FLQ crisis, yet largely impervious to the everyday needs of newcomers whose existence had become reduced to a struggle for economic and emotional survival. Loosely held together by the themes of exile, dislocation, and the stings of memory (lost relatives, friends, dreams, ideals, a place to call home), each of the dramas unfolds along equally steep social and work-related learning curves, albeit in different personal contexts and degrees of introspection. The most accomplished of the three is the feature-length segment directed by Mallet, which has since come to be identified with the trilogy itself.<sup>28</sup>

Marilú Mallet went on to direct four NFB documentaries over the next eleven years, exploring the vicissitudes of the diasporic experience at arms length in all but one of the four. *Les Borges* (1978) documents the experience of a family who had immigrated to Montreal from Portugal in 1967, while *Child of the Andes* (1988) offers a narrative account of the history and customs of the people of Andahuaylillas, a small town in Peru north of the Chilean border. The story is told through the eyes of ten-year old Sebastiana against the backdrop of local myths and legends.<sup>29</sup> Shot on location, this fictionalized



documentary offers a surprisingly nostalgic “look at a simpler way of life still undisturbed by modern society’s technology and materialism.”<sup>30</sup> In *Chère Amérique* (1989), Mallet returns to her adoptive home to tell the story of two Montreal women: a young Québécoise struggling with the conflicting desire for children and aspirations to a musical career, and an older Portuguese immigrant who, as described in the program notes, “sacrificed the love of her children” for work, eventually becoming a millionaire. The exception is her widely distributed *Journal Inachevée* (*Unfinished Diaries*, 1986), in which Mallet returns to autobiographical concerns and the exploration of the diasporic consciousness that she began to address in her first film.

A strong presence in the festival circuit when it first came out, *Unfinished Diaries* has since come to occupy an important place in both Latin American and Latinx film history. This critically acclaimed work, described by a *Globe and Mail* reviewer as “Sad but strong, unsentimental but nostalgic, and thoroughly engrossing,”<sup>31</sup> is a semi-autobiographical docudrama about a Chilean woman film director who, like Mallet herself, lives and works in French-speaking Canada. Rhythmically meditative and visually structured to underscore the intense subjectivity of the point of view (voice over, camera presence, etc.), this often wrenching film takes a hard look at the specific difficulties experienced by women artists in exile, ranging from the misunderstanding and rejection of their work to the power imbalances characteristic of the inter- and intra-ethnocultural relationships with which they have to contend on a daily basis.

Of particular poignancy is the scene where, after a heated discussion with her Australian husband (a filmmaker in his own right) about her work, Mallet’s fictional surrogate is driven to near hysteria by the power game governing his passive-aggressive criticism of her purportedly “too subjective” approach to filmmaking. Her candid reaction and the reality-effect of this scene (an uncut static long shot from an extreme high angle) is startling. Following this critical moment in the film, and as if to underscore both the solitude of women artists and their need to rely on their immigrant communities, Mallet goes on to interview other exiles (including then largely unknown writer Isabel Allende, Salvador Allende’s daughter). This adds a communal dimension to her personal life and weaves the experience of her professional and cultural peers into her own artistic vision.

After a five-year hiatus, Mallet returned to filmmaking with *Rue de la mémoire/Suspended Memories* (Cinema Libre 1996), a forty-two-minute fiction film that confirmed her as one of the most innovative independent filmmakers in Canada, as well as a beacon of Latinx-Canadian film. An adaptation of one of her own short novellas, shot in Super 16, *Suspended Memories* returns once again to the theme of failed inter-ethnocultural relationships, focusing this time on the unsuccessful struggle to build a relationship between a Chilean émigré and torture survivor and a Jewish son of Holocaust survivors. This film represents a departure from the documentary thrust of Mallet’s earlier work. Rather than casting herself in the leading role and once again turning the camera on herself and her family, she uses professional actors (including Arsinée Khanjian in the leading role) and tells a story only loosely based on past personal experience. In ways reminiscent of the Magic Realism associated with the literature of the Latin American Boom of

the 1960s and early 1970s, she freely manipulates sound and image to add an often haunting pictoriality to her signature rhythmic lyricism and meditative non-linear narration technique. The scene where the ghosts carried by the main character in her memory become “present” around the dinner table is a notable example.

By expressing the relationship between personal histories and a people’s history, focusing on the formal interplay of subjective memories and objective times, *Suspended Memories* marks a departure from the earlier focus on identity and self-representation. In *Double Portrait* (1999), however, she comes back to autobiography in order to explore the delicate and conflicted territory of mother/daughter relationships, through her relationship with her own mother. Here she continues to pay close attention to the small details of everyday life, the mainstay of memory, and the splitting inherent in diasporic identities with an acutely developed double consciousness of self and/as Other, signalled by the title.

For Mallet and others in her generation, the 1980s were a period of adaptation and transition. This often translated into a return South, where and from where distances relegated in the course of time to the imagination would be measured with the yardstick of transformed realities and a newfound sense of belonging (or not). Gastón Ancelovici’s NFB documentary, *Onward Christian Soldiers* (Chile-Canada, 1989/90), shot on location in Canada, the U.S., Brazil, and Ecuador, examines the monumental growth of, and limited resistance to the spread of Protestant Churches throughout Latin America. Ancelovici returned to Chile to direct *Chacabuco. Memories of Silence* (2001), a testimonial documentary that recounts the little-known story of Chacabuco, a concentration camp in Northern Chile that was home to several members of the Chilean intelligentsia during the Dirty War. The film was shot on location and the stories reconstructed by a handful of survivors, who returned to Chacabuco with their now adult children and spouses to face their own demons after nearly thirty years.<sup>32</sup>

This kind of work on memory and the diasporic imagination is not exclusive to film and video makers of Chilean descent. Colombia born Germán Gutiérrez produced a documentary about the life of Salvadorian, Argentinean and Chilean immigrants living in Montreal (*La Familia Latina/The Latino Family*, NFB 1986), where the term “Latino” is publicly used for the first time. The shorts, *Vivre en Amazonie/Life in the Amazon* and *Americas 500* (released by the NFB in 1993) are also based on return journeys to Latin America. Like Ancelovici did with religious fundamentalism, Gutiérrez identifies the drug trade as a pan-American problem in *Society Under the Influence* (1997). The first by a Latinx filmmaker to achieve distribution on national TV, this documentary brought home the dismal implications of the failed “War on Drugs” to an estimated two and half million spectators nationwide. It was shot on location in Bogota, New York, Montreal, and Amsterdam, with Gutiérrez as director, cameraman, art director, and reporter. It combines reenactments of criminal court cases with interviews of a wide range of people involved in the drug trade, thereby tying production in the South and consumption in the North to the movement of international capital worldwide.

### The Other’s Other Within

Another element just as noteworthy as the recurrent theme of returning South to one’s birthplace is the relationship to their



"Other within", the aboriginal populations ("Indians," "Natives," or "First Nations"), in the North and the South.

This theme is important, first because it ties the whole continent together through a shared history of colonization and resistant adaptation spanning over 500 years. It also functions as a thread that links the work of the first generation of Latin-American filmmakers to the next, and helps to distinguish between them according to subtle yet significant variations. The first generation can be said to displace onto their respective Native "Other within" a personal sense of being othered as a result of becoming a minority in their adopted land. The second generation, however, tends to engage in deeper processes of Other-identification and self-redefinition, departing from the intersections of race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender to arrive at a balkanization of both being and seeing.

Oblivious to discourses of belonging, like the contemporary group of media artists identified by Noriega and López in *The Ethnic Eye*, the artists of this generation resort to strategies of textual and formal hybridization and code-switching. In the process of making their films legible to more than one interpretive community without sacrificing their claim to difference, they offer a palimpsest of accommodation, assimilation, and transnationality, while making ethnic and gender differentiations harder to ascertain. Juan Balmaceda's *Nishin* (1994), for instance, a fast-paced music video co-directed by Native Canadian Keith Herrick, blends together segments of Aboriginal North and South American songs over triumphal images of the people of Chiapas, leading up to the uprising.

His eight-minute documentary video *La Shamana* (1997), on the other hand, crosses over the gender divide to tell the story of a young woman's initiation as a spiritual healer and her use of hallucinogens during this process.

In somewhat different fashion, Claudia Medina's *In Between the Middle/Entre el medio* (2001) looks to the history of her own Mexican ancestors for the roots of native spirituality. Shot in Super 16 on location in Mexico with local actors and mastered on digital beta, this independent twenty-minute short is a rendering of Native spirituality based on stories told by Medina's grandmother, a *curandera*, or healer, who is fictionalized in the film. In this story, a young man and woman, Rafael (José Luis Ordoñez) and Trinidad (Claudia Garcés Ríos), inhabit each other's "other side" divided by the invisible and porous wall separating life and death. Trinidad, whose soul abandons her while she dreams, and Rafael, whose spirit cannot find rest since he died far from home, find themselves caught in a nowhere space between life and death until the old *curandera* finally released from their respective nightmares. Like Balmaceda, Medina privileges Native American spirituality, underscoring cultural differences in our approaches to death and dying and blending a coherent narrative with experimental oneiric techniques.

Going a step further in the crossover process, Jorge Manzano's trilingually titled docudrama, *Odenaag Naabndamwin/City of Dreams/Ciudad de Sueños* (1995), imports the testimonial genre, indigenous to Latin American literature, to the Canadian screen.<sup>33</sup> Here, Marcel Commanda, a man

Augustia







from the Rama First Nation who died shortly after its completion, recounts a story of recovery from alcoholism, jail, and the spiritual rebirth experienced in the return to the reservation from the city. In his next film, *Johnny Greyeyes* (1999), Manzano, who was brought from Chile to Canada as a child, takes the process one step further in telling another bittersweet First-Nation story. This time it is about a Native lesbian woman who finds her way home as a result of falling in love with another inmate after many years in prison. This feature-length film, which received the Freedom Prize at the Vancouver Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and the Bulloch Award for best Canadian film, was billed at the Sundance Festival as a "Native Canadian Drama."

Another successful negotiation of multiple positionalities is illustrated by Columbian-born Jorge Lozano's experimental film *Tampon Thieves* (1995)—a portrayal of the trials and tribulations of a single father faced with raising a teenage daughter on the margins of Torontonion culture and rampant consumerism, set against the backdrop of its vibrant gay Latin nightlife.

Lozano went on to create, in collaboration with Sinara Rozo, *Living Culture (Cultura Viva)*, an interactive multimedia installation exhibited to considerable popular acclaim in Toronto (1997) and Vancouver (1999). In it digital projection, multiple soundscapes, and artisanal religious artefacts combine to create a simultaneously sacred and secular space where Aboriginal and Afro-American religious iconography function as a catalyst for popular and elite art forms, as well as for national, subnational and international identity formations.<sup>33</sup>

Lozano is one of a handful of Latino-Canadian artists to have successfully promoted Latino-Canadian media arts at the institutional and national levels. His work falls somewhere between the two generations in that it weaves formal experi-

mentation into pan-Latino discourses of belonging.<sup>34</sup> It is a characteristic that sets the more established Lozano apart from others who, like Balmaceda, Manzano, Medina, and Morgado, are more typical among the second generation of Latino-Canadian media artists in that they have received professional training at art schools and institutions throughout the country. The absence of discourses of belonging from their work goes hand in hand with a return to classical narrative forms, albeit without altogether forfeiting formal experimentation. Nor do issues related to the representation of gender, ethnic, national or subnational identities disappear from their work. With the occasional exception, however, they become simply one element among others in the wider cultural field. Implicitly uncontested, and therefore exempt from the need for recognition, identity and difference are displaced rather onto a *mise-en-scène* where the grain, texture, and flavour of a new Latino-Canadian identity formation-in-the-making are eloquently yet silently expressed.

Chilean-born Morgado is more typical of the second generation of Latino-Canadian media artists who have received professional training at art schools and institutions throughout the country. A comparison of her representational politics and Javiera Fombona's reminds us the necessary caution due to the broad generalizations that the generational model invites. Venezuelan-born Fombona's experimental Video *The Door* (1997), which takes Canadian society to task for its double standards in denying equal visibility to lesbians, tends to fall back on a politics of recognition. The underlying strategy of Morgado's films, by contrast, is to take not only homosexuality but also national, ethnic, and linguistic differences for granted, with the result that they come to be perceived as natural or the norm. Her aim is to make a financially successful film in a cross-cultural setting where ethnic or linguistic differences and lesbian normalcy are moot.<sup>35</sup>

Like other gay and lesbian Latino media artists of her generation, Morgado has indirectly benefited from what Negrón-Muntaner describes as "the creation of Latino and independent film/video infrastructures, and ... critical debates around Latino cultural production." These have "laid the groundwork for the production and reception of more recent Latino queer films and videos as media."<sup>36</sup> Morgado immigrated to Canada in her early twenties and is building her promising career as a "transfrontera" subject with an unabashedly sexually polymorphous Latino persona. A constant presence in the film festival circuit, her films appeal to many audiences: pan-Latino and non-Latino, lesbian and straight, Canadian, Latin American, and international audiences. Situated at the crossroads of multiple social, cultural, formal and aesthetic divides, her works combine a sleek, focused narrative line with a sophisticated pictorial aestheticism, while incorporating traditional Latin rhythms and penchant for kitsch, thus containing the exuberance of the Neo-Baroque aesthetic within a minimalist narra-



tive frame. Her use of the *bolero* in the music film *Angustia* (1997) and the experimental short *Sabor a mi* (1999), for example, both appeals to and contests the rich tradition of this popular Latin American Romantic musical form; it enables her to displace to a lesbian register forms of masochistic desire that were originally articulated for a heterosexual audience.

In one of her films, the eight-minute *Ode to the Chilotas* (*Oda a las Chilotas*) (1989), Morgado, like Mallet, has chosen to return to the landscape of her earlier memories. However, she did not engage in an epic quest for national identity, nor did she recreate either the urban setting of her childhood or a rural society with tenuous ties to her personal experience. Rather, she produced an intimate portrait of everyday life in a remote island in Southern Chile where, for centuries, the Chilota have maintained a functional matricentric society. After this visual tribute to a little known slice of women's history, Morgado went on to create the experimental animation short *Spit It Out* (1992). Five years later she made *Angustia*, an innovative and audacious contribution to what Frances Negrón-Muntaner identifies as the "structure of feeling" generated by Latin gay and lesbian independent film within an "Anglo" context. This "structure of feeling" is constituted by the following six elements:

formal hybridity (mixing of diverse genres and modes of address), self-reflexivity, the construction of an artist persona often involved in a journey of discovery and confrontation, the representation of geographical dislocation, the [re]contextualization of the subject's drama within the immediate and/or symbolic family, and the self-conscious use of media to construct an alternative reality for the speaking subject/subject of representation.<sup>37</sup>

To a greater or lesser extent, Morgado's films illustrate these characteristics. The affirmation of an immigrant gay/bisexual identity through the use of both Spanish and English is meant, as Negrón-Muntaner points out, to appeal more to gay and lesbian Latin audiences than to Latin American audiences. However, unlike most US gay and lesbian Latin films, Morgado's films evince a quest for a language with which to manifest multiple marginalized desires; they could hardly be described as "texts of simultaneous healing and rupture, assimilation ('English') and affirmation of difference (accent), folded maps of journeys of no return that leave the speaking subject always wanting."<sup>38</sup> Both visually and aurally, her films subvert homophobic codes and prevailing racial stereotypes by generating a structure of feeling where excess is privileged over lack, as are diversity and process over singularity and ends. *Angustia*, for instance, simultaneously deconstructs and refigures the naked, blindfolded, and ecstatic woman on whose body the words of the *bolero* are elegantly inscribed. Rather than resorting to the obtuse framing, distorting camera angles or fast-paced montage of her earlier work, Morgado opts for a nimble



camera in order to map out the inner and outer surfaces of a static and ecstatic subject. She thereby elicits a re-reading of both words and the body, that demands sensorial involvement in the spectatorial process.

Further developing her interest in female sexuality and cultural difference, Morgado's next film, the experimental documentary *Unbound/Sin ataduras* (1995), compares individual and cultural differences in women's relationship to their breasts. Released to critical acclaim, this award-winning twenty-minute short is a veritable *tour de force* that established Morgado as one of the more promising young talents in the Canadian filmmaking scene. She personalizes the political, not least by exposing her own breasts in the opening moments of the film. In the series of vignettes that follow, women from different national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (France, El Salvador, Somalia, New Zealand, as well as First Nations and other Canadians), candidly describe (often in their own language) their unique (and culturally modulated) relationship to their breasts and its impact on their experience of femininity. With a strong emphasis on the pictoriality that characterizes her work, each vignette is carefully constructed both to mirror each woman's cultural and aesthetic heritage, and to engage in an eclectic dialogue with both the avant-garde and classical pictorial traditions. Allusions range from Botero's signature oversized figures, to Caravaggio's lush sensual chiaroscuros, and Morgado's own metaphorical backdrop constructions of culturally specific themes. The result is a dazzling banquet of visual, cultural, and personal constructions of an experience unique to women, celebrating the similarities and differences that both unite and separate them rather than encouraging antagonisms.

Morgado's next film, *Sabor a mi* (*Savour Me*), represents her first experiment with classical narrative. In this twenty-minute



independent film, which is all the more subtly disruptive for its apparent conventionality, Morgado continues to contest dominant modes of representation. Again using *boleros* as the guiding rod of visual and auditory desire, *Sabor a mi* tells a story of seduction between two women who live side by side, one married and straight (played by well known Latino performer and writer Carmen Aguirre), the other single and a lesbian. Described in festival programs as "a perfectly balanced and cinematically breathtaking ... voyeuristic mecca," this story of lesbian seduction unfolds, with virtually no dialogue, by way of a number of shots and reverse shots that link two neighbouring apartments through an opening in the wall. This brings together two women who watch the most intimate moments of each other's lives only to discover a mutual longing. Encased within an elaborate frame, the wall opening functions here as a visual metaphor that adds a referential and aesthetic dimension to the story.

With *Sabor a mi*, Morgado moves further in the direction of a more explicitly Latino identity formation, including *boleros*, a Neo-Baroque use of colour and space, sparse English dialogue, Latinized objects in the women's living quarters (including a portrait by Argentinean-Canadian painter Nora Patrich), an elaborate hallway altar to the Virgin Mother (under whose gaze the two women "confess" their desire for one another in a silent ceremony that includes communion through blood), and the young daughter's flight through the window on the wings of an angel in the closing shot of the film. This combination authorizes lesbian desire by naturalizing it over and beyond its immediate Latino context, while also making *Sabor a mi* a Latino-Canadian film in the most literal sense possible.<sup>39</sup> Most recently, Morgado completed the fifteen-minute short *Bitten* (2002), a black humored tale of cannibalism as an initiation ritual between mother and daughter, constructed following some of the formal conventions of the Western. It has already won several awards, including the Audience Award for Best Short Film at the 2003 New York International Film and Video Festival.

The Latino self-referentiality of Morgado's *Sabor a mi* is shared by one other Latino-Canadian film, the experimental performance piece *Crucero* (*Crossroads*) (1994), the result of a fruitful collaboration between the late first generation director Ramiro Puerta (a Colombian-Canadian) and writer and actor Guillermo Verdecchia (an Argentinean-Canadian whose award-winning script and performance the film documents). Framing the conceptual and stylistic concerns of both generations of Latino-Canadian media artists around questions of social and institutional representation, they explore the in-between space that governs the diasporic experience, offering a humorous, sophisticated, and exacting look at changing notions of a pan-Latino and, more specifically, Latino-Canadian identity.<sup>40</sup> By engaging in the post-national reinvention of place from the perspective of hybrid imagined communities, and retracing the fine line that separates the wider contextual whole from the social, historical, and cultural specificities of its constituent parts, Latino Canadian filmmakers and media artists are engaged in a diasporic identity formation that is becoming the norm for an ever growing number of people across the globe.

Latino Canadian artists, including filmmakers like Mallet and Morgado, have broached topics of specific interest to them in new ways that incorporate their own multiple cultural references while appealing to a multiplicity of audiences. Moving

between and beyond real and imaginary homelands, both generations have come to address the profound displacement and dis-location experienced by diasporic communities (that is becoming the norm for an ever growing number of refugees and displaced persons throughout the globe) in ways specific to the Canadian context from which they sprang. Eclectic in their application of form and content, and strategic in their provisional embodiment of subject position and location of address, their work reminds us that, while any pan-ethnic integrity is as imagined as the integrity of its constituent parts, as a social, political, and critical category, "Latino-Canadian" offers an important alternative to a homogenizing politics of recognition defined by the "dominant" culture from "above". The assignments of a Latino-Canadian identity not only can help carve out a critical space for films and videos produced by Canadian artists of Latin American and Caribbean descent. At this historical juncture, it has already provided access to museums, the film festival circuit, grant opportunities, and as my presence in this issue attests, to conferences, symposia, and the written word. One of the most valuable lessons to emerge from the diasporic experience is the confirmation that, eventually, a time comes when, as Ariel Dorfman says, "another language can keep us company as if it were a twin."<sup>41</sup> Perversely or not, given the ongoing budget cuts to education, lacklustre support for the arts, and risks of xenophobia, this knowledge is a gift that will continue to go unrecognized at monocularism's peril.

**Elena Feder** is an independent scholar, with a PhD in Comparative Literature from Stanford University. She teaches film studies at Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia and is founder and executive director of "Americas on the Verge. Society for the Advancement of Arts and Culture" in Vancouver.

## Notes

- 1 In *Latinos: A Biography of the People*, Earl Shorris reports that the U.S. Census "was on the verge of" selecting *Latino* as a census category but rejected the idea because of its association with "Ladino," the old Castilian language preserved to this day by descendants of the Jews who left Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. (New York: Avon Books, 1992). According to Shorris, although published in 1992, the idea for this book as a book specifically on Latinos dates back to 1970. The first anthology of Latino literature per se, Harold Augenbraum and Margarite Fernández Olmos, *The Latino Reader: An American Literary Tradition from 1952 to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997) was also published in the nineties.
- 2 This obvious truth applies even when the use of English is not associated with the "dominant" cultural formation, as in the case of Trinidad, the Philippines or the Bahamas. I want to thank David Bercovici-Artiaga for this important observation.
- 3 To (re)mark on this difference not only complexifies the complementary and sometimes oppositional relations binding together traditionally gendered binary pairs (man/woman, gay/lesbian, transgendered/straight, etc.). It also exposes their provisional and, in the context of globalization, increasingly malleable nature.
- 4 This point serves to reintroduce gender into Paul Willemen analysis of Third Cinema as counter cinema, in "The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1989), pp. 7-8 and *passim*.
- 5 Martha E. Giménez, "Latinos, Hispanics... What Next!: Some Reflections on the Politics of Identity in the U.S." *Heresies* 7 (1993), p. 40.
- 6 For Shorris and others in the nineties, the distinction has "less to do with evidence than with politics." Shorris, p. 15.
- 7 Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. xx and xiii. Drawing partly upon earlier research on Queer, Mexican, the New Latin American and Third Cinema cinemas, the collection brings together the work of both established and emerging filmmakers, artists and scholars, many of whom were graduate students at the time of writing. Although essays on film (documentary and fiction) predominate, the collection covers a wide range of media and critical practices, including video, performance, digital and laser art, multimedia installations. The emphasis is here on issues of Latino



- self-representation in U.S. non-mainstream culture.
- 8 Whereas Augenbraum and Fernández Olmos trace the beginnings of Latino literary history to the Conquest, Shorris sees the roots of Latino identity as the amalgamation of three main sources: the already multi-ethnic population of late-Medieval Spain, the remains of Aztec, Maya, Inca, Toltec, Mexica and other "Indian" civilizations in the Americas, and the descendants of African, mostly Yoruban, slaves. Shorris is alone in adding an Asian component to this social formation, albeit not the first to trace its roots back to the Conquest.
- 9 For the impact of the Cuban diaspora on U.S. and Latino film history, see Ana M. López, "Greater Cuba" in *The Ethnic Eye*, pp. 38-58.
- 10 Noriega and López, xx and *passim*. Noriega also edited *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). Other books on Chicano cinema (by far the most widely studied of the three dominant "Latino" cinemas in the U.S.) include: Gary D. Keller, ed., *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews, and Resources* (Binghamton, New York: Bilingual Review Press, 1985) and his *Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview and Handbook* (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press, 1994); and Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). In addition to Hadley-Garcia's *Hispanic Hollywood* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1993), studies whose aim is to "fuse" or "mediate" the pan-latino/U.S. anglo divide include John King, Ana M. López, Manuel Alvarado, eds., *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas* (London: British Film Institute, 1993); Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: The New Press, 1995); an early theorization of gender-inflected latino/anglo-mestizo/a spectatorship, Carmen Huaco-Nuzum's doctoral dissertation, *Mestiza Subjectivity: Representation and Spectatorship in Mexican and Hollywood Films* (U. of California, Santa Cruz, 1993); and the introductory anthology of critical writings by Clara E. Rodriguez, ed., *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), which includes three essays on Puerto Rican cinema. To my knowledge, no book-length studies of either Puerto Rican cinema or of what Ana López calls "Greater Cuba" cinema—by which she means both Cuban exile and island cinemas—exist to date.
- 11 Noriega and López, xii.
- 12 Gayatri Spivak "The Problem of Cultural Self-Representation," Sarah Harasym, ed. *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990) p. 57.
- 13 Amy Gutmann, ed. *Multiculturalism and the "Politics of Recognition."* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) p. 71.
- 14 "Greater Cuba," in Noriega and López, 38.
- 15 Noriega and López, x.
- 16 Chicanos, the most substantial of the three, trace their history to the acquisition of half of Mexico's national territory by the United States through the US-Mexico War of 1846-48. Puerto Ricans and Cubans trace it, respectively, to the annexation of the island of Puerto Rico following the Spanish-American war of 1898, and to the arrival of thousands of anti-Castro refugees from the Cuban Revolution of 1959.
- 17 See Noriega's "Imagined Borders: Locating Chicano Cinema in America/América," in *The Ethnic Eye*, 3-21, where he argues that Chicano Cinema "developed not just vis-à-vis Hollywood and the New Latin American Cinema (as well as cinema and television), but through the disavowal of an avant-garde tradition within Chicano cultural production (1965-1975)" (4). See also his above-mentioned *Chicanos and Film*.
- 18 This point requires more contextualization than can be provided here. To further underscore its complexity (as well as differences between the US and Canadian contexts in terms of their respective audiences), suffice it to note that by the mid-1980s Televisa, the Mexican film and television conglomerate, has acquired more than a 75 percent interest in the Spanish International Network in the United States. See Gary Keller, *Chicano Cinema*, 20. Keller also reminds us of Carl Mora's observation that "The U.S. market is estimated at 25 million people and represents 40% of Mexico's film export sales. There are about 450 Spanish-language theaters in the U.S. that bring \$45 million a year" (20).
- 19 Dubois describes the moment when he first recognized himself as Other (in response to the sting of a white girl's depreciative returning gaze) as the internalization of a split subjectivity, a darkly-veiled "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), p. 3. Originally published in 1903. Fanon, who after studying psychoanalysis in Paris as a colonial from Martinique applied Lacan's deconstructive approach to his clinical practice with people of color, also wrote poignantly of the "shame and self-hatred" and the "nausea" he felt as a result of an equally overreaching visual sting. "La honte. La honte et le mépris de moi-même. La nausée. Quand on m'aime, on me dit que c'est malgré ma couleur. Quand on me déteste, on ajoute que ce n'est pas à cause de ma couleur... Ici ou là, je suis prisonnier du cercle infernal." [The shame. The shame and the self-hatred. The nausea. When someone loves me, I am told that it is in spite of my colour. When someone hates me, they add that it is not due to my colour... Here or there, I am a prisoner of an infernal circle]. Franz Fanon, *Peau noire masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), p. 94. See especially the chapter titled "L'expérience vécue du Noir."
- 20 As a form of erasure, censorship banishes the repressed, potentially at perpetuity. Not all forms of mediation are the same. For more on the "repression hypothesis," see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) pp. 10-13.
- 21 Noriega and López, *The Ethnic Eye*, xx.
- 22 For the implications of this 'perverse' consciousness for 'minority' cultural workers in the academy and funding art institutions, see Chon Noriega, "On Curating," *Wide Angle* 17, 301-2. Noriega's position as curator, historian and critic differs radically from the more classic critique of ethnographic representation where the subject remains defined by the bounds of individual experience and the politics of recognition. See, for example, Fatima Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) pp. 5-6.
- 23 Among these are writers Carmen Rodríguez and Francisco Ibáñez Carrasco (originally from Chile) and Jaime García Arbeláez (from Colombia). Lhasa and Nelly Furtado and other fine songwriters and interpreters have also made a mark in music. In the theatre, writers and performers Guillermo Verdecchia and Carmen Aguirre have been widely recognized for their work. Aguirre has also worked with young Latino actors to bring their experiences of exile and dislocation to the stage, producing *Que pasa con la Raza, eh?* (Vancouver 2000) and *Spics and Spam* (Vancouver 2002). It is impossible, at this point, to determine the number of visual artists working in Canada. In Vancouver alone I would estimate their number as close to thirty.
- 24 For an excellent analysis of this issue, see Ardele Lister's independent video essay, *Conditional Love. See Under Nationalism: Canada* (1997).
- 25 For more on this movement, see Zuzanna Pick, "Chilean Cinema: Ten Years of Exile, 1973-1983," *Jump Cut*, no. 32 (April 1986).
- 26 According to a recent estimate, as many as 200,000 to 300,000 Colombians fleeing a fifteen-year-long undeclared civil war have migrated to the United States in the past three years alone. See Michael W. Collier and Eduardo A. Gamarra, "The Colombian Diaspora in South Florida," *LACC*, Working Paper Series no. 1 (May 2001), 1. There are no similar research projects on the Colombian or Argentinean diasporas in Canada to date.
- 27 Other films in this tradition are: *Miguel Littin clandestino en Chile* (Miguel Littin 1986), published later as a monograph by Gabriel García Márquez, and, more recently, Patricio Guzmán's *La memoria obstinada / The Obstinate Memory* (1997), funded in part by the National Film Board. Guzmán is best known for the New Latin American Cinema classic *The Battle of Chile* (1975-76). The footage smuggled out of Chile after the 1973 coup was to be edited in Canada before ending up in France.
- 28 Fajardo went on to direct more than 20 independent films and documentaries, including *Le soulier* (1981), and several novels and plays.
- 29 The child's name may refer to Jorge Ruiz's *Vuelve Sebastiana* (Bolivia 1953), one of the earliest documentary classics of the New Latin American Cinema, where an Uru child of the same name is also portrayed as the repository of the wisdom of her people and their potential salvation.
- 30 Quoted from program notes, NFB website: [www.nfb.ca](http://www.nfb.ca)
- 31 Quoted from program notes, NFB website: [www.nfb.ca](http://www.nfb.ca)
- 32 Among them are Angel Parra (musician, singer, composer), son of Violeta Parra, who was in Chacabuco from early November 1973 to end of January 1974, and currently lives in France; the poet Jorge Montealegre Imprisoned in Chacabuco at nineteen years of age; union leader Rafael Salas; architects Andres Crisosto and Adam Policzer; Dr. Mariano Requena, Allende's personal physician; the camp's Chaplain, and a former commander of the armed forces.
- 33 Generally exhibiting cross-class and gender alliances, this genre differs from both biography and autobiography in that it allows for the recounting of a personal story by someone other than the subject him/herself, usually from different social and economic classes, without doing away with the subject's first person narrative voice.
- 34 Lozano and Cuban-born Ricardo Acosta curated *Crossing Borders*, the first two festivals of Latin American and Latino film and video held in Canada (Toronto in 1995 and 1997). My thanks go to them both for their invaluable help in making possible the film retrospective, exhibitions, and symposium that I curated under the title *Nations, Pollinations, and Dislocations. Changing Imaginary Borders in the Americas* in Vancouver in 1999.
- 35 Personal communication, Vancouver, November 1999.
- 36 Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "Drama Queens: Latino Gay and Lesbian Independent Film/Video," in Noriega and López, 60.
- 37 Negrón-Muntaner, 64.
- 38 Negrón-Muntaner, 63-4. She takes this concept from Raymond Williams, who defines it as "a social experience which is still in process ... not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, indiosyncratic — and even isolating." Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.
- 39 Honoured in several festivals, this small jewel of a film has received 2nd Prize (Coral) for Best Short Film at the Havana International Film Festival, Cuba 1994; 1st Prize (India Catalina) for Best Short Film in Cartagena International film Festival, Colombia 1995; and Gold Danzante for Best Short Film at the International Short Film Festival, Huesca, Spain 1995.
- 40 Ariel Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North* (New York, etc: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 6.



# Seeing and Being Seen in Media Culture

SHELLEY NIRO'S *HONEY MOCCASIN*

by Darrell Varga

In the work of Mohawk visual artist Shelley Niro native stereotypes are deconstructed while at the same time racial identity is not taken as historically fixed and timeless. Rather, identity is understood as an ongoing formative process whereby the vitality of culture is measured in the creative energy of adaptation and appropriation (among other traits) in the expression of tradition and in the face of the consequences of contemporary history. As a reviewer of her photography series *Mohawks in Beehives* notes: "[Niro's] work is situated in a contemporary reality of what it means to be a First Nations woman. Her references to soap operas, the Canadian national anthem, Hollywood and fifties' lifestyle complete with hairdryers, articulate an identity that has to do with lived experience rather than some essentialist or nostalgic cultural identity."<sup>1</sup> At the same time her artwork provides a vital critical engagement with western hegemony, humorously sketching the kitsch of consumerist media culture as marker of the more oppressive and assimilationist political project. While the above reviewer's description of the artwork suggests a postmodern appeal to the surfaces of consumer culture, what also emerges is an understanding of identity that consists of more than fashion and artifact. Indeed, it is the very subject of identity rather than "difference" that troubles the seductive surfaces of the postmodern.

In Niro's films *It Starts with a Whisper* (co-directed with Anna Gronau, 1993) and *Honey Moccasin* (1998) the grim stereotype image of the disenfranchised native typically found on Canadian television is replaced by characters who have a sophisticated historical consciousness and desire to navigate the flux of identity formed out of tradition, everyday reality, dominant media culture, and the creative process of change.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, mainstream or what I call the "good liberal" narrative of First Nation experience, while often examining the important issues of residential schools, racism, and the economic dislocation of many reservation residents, often also articulate the native as a sad figure of traditional culture unable to adapt to contemporary reality and accordingly doomed to disappear. As Daniel Francis points out, the prediction of the vanishing native informs the historical breadth of contact with white Europeans, notwithstanding the necessity of native assistance to early settlers and participation in the fur trade. The narrative of a vanishing people becomes especially dominant as Canada shifts from a fur-trade and resource colony to an agricultural and increasingly industrialized political economy by the end of the nineteenth century. With settlement emerges the culture industry and the museumization of the native as noble figure of the past. According to Francis: "While artists like Emily Carr lamented the fate of the Indian, their success was predicated on it. Having first of all destroyed many aspects of Native culture, White society now turned around and admired its own recreations of what it had destroyed. To the extent that they suffered any guilt over what had happened to the Native people, Whites relieved it by preserving evidence of the supposedly dying culture. Whites convinced themselves that they were in this way saving the Indians."<sup>3</sup> As a kind of antidote to the history of this bad medicine, the spirit voices who visit the main character Shanna in *It Starts with a Whisper* quietly urge: "Shanna don't be sad we made it through another year, a short five hundred years. Next year will be better." It is this irony, subtle wit, and assertion of the complexity of identity in relation to the long road of history that characterizes Niro's films. It is an identity which is not simply a reproduction of the





grim Canadian cultural cliché of survival; rather, it is shaped by a self-referential awareness of process and change emergent with the creative act of performance and perception.

In a curatorial statement from 1994 Shelley Niro affirms the longstanding importance of image-making in First Nations culture, from the design of Iroquois wampum belts to record legal transactions to the importance of totem poles for west coast natives: "Art was not a superfluous pastime but part of peoples' own physical reality. Everyday existence was intermeshed with the lives or spirit lives of passed-on ancestors. So the idea of knowing where one came from, and where one is, is a continuity."<sup>4</sup> The images of culture are not simply markers of the past but are a means of expressing and adapting to historical change and as such are integrated with the material conditions of the present. Art is neither simplified as craft nor objectified as aesthetic commodity in the European sense, it is instead integrated with material and spiritual aspects of life. But image-making in the contemporary era is dominated by the structuring force of media culture. *Honey Moccasin* is a film about the challenge of seeing and being seen in media culture and the negotiation of identity in the face of mass media-reproduced stereotypes of the Native reservation.

Gerald McMaster explains the complex role of the territorial reserve in ascribing Native identity: "It is a negotiated space set aside for Indian people by oppressive colonial governments to isolate them, to extricate them from their cultural habits, and to save them from the vices of the outside world. Paradoxically, isolation helped maintain aboriginal languages and many other traditional practices. The reserve continues to be an affirming presence despite being plagued by many his-

torical uncertainties..."<sup>5</sup> McMaster goes on to describe the concept of place in contemporary Native art which neither romanticizes an essentialist reserve nor does it ignore the historical circumstances of reservation formation (as a form of prison) such that the articulation of community remains bound up with the complexity of place. Place in turn is produced through the relation between particular experience and social and historical forces. McMaster takes the title for his landmark exhibition of contemporary Canadian native art, for which his text was produced, from the opening description in the script for *Honey Moccasin*: "The locale...is a Reservation X otherwise known as the Grand Pine Indian Reservation."<sup>6</sup> He explains the title as signaling an interconnection of fiction and reality as well as marking the historical swindle of treaty negotiations for which "Indian chiefs had their hands held in order to sign an X as a mark of their consent and understanding of the political process."<sup>7</sup> Niro's film, in turn explores the marking of community identity in relation to this mediated figuration of place. The name Grand Pine also echoes an important place-name in the violence of genocide, namely the Pine Ridge reservation, location of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre of a small Lakota band by the U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> cavalry. What the film suggests is that place is a contested ground bound by the violence of dominant hegemony inscribed in blood upon the land, but place also invokes resistance, and that history is a narrative of struggle informed by tradition and the experience of violence as much as by the contemporary exercise of autonomy.

While mass market stereotypes of native culture collapses the specificity of place and nation, this imagery likewise casts the native in the far-off locale. The reservation in *Honey*



*Moccasin*, however, exists in dialectical relation with the metropolis. Similarly, Shanna in *It Starts with a Whisper* listens for the whispering spirit voices and contemplates the near-disappearance of the Tutelo who had lived along the Grand Pine River in the area of the Six Nations Reserve (near what is now the town of Brantford in southern Ontario). But Shanna also works at an office in Toronto and has to reconcile the need to remember this past and to live her life in the present in the face of overwhelmingly negative stereotypes of natives in the mass media. It is precisely this advice that she is given in a dream image whereupon she is visited by contemporary Canadian native political figure Elijah Harper who tells her: "We must fight these negative stereotypes...[but] stop feeling guilty about your existence. You are here to live your life." The appearance of Harper invokes the fact that history is made, it is not simply fixed and set in the past. The film was produced immediately following the failure to legislate the Canadian constitutional changes known as the Meech Lake Constitutional Accord in which First Nations autonomy would be diminished. Harper was an elected member of the legislature in the province of Manitoba and provided the sole dissenting vote preventing the required unanimous provincial legislative consent for constitutional changes. While mainstream Canadian media tends to elide this important intervention of First Nations political will for the sake of the ongoing narrative of the constitutional debates between the federal government

and the province of Quebec, it serves to demonstrate how the determination of place within the narrative of national history may be disrupted.

The borders of the nation-state remain a contested political frame in spite of the naturalizing force of dominant ideology. Moreover, technologies of travel and visualization complicate, though do not eliminate, spatial isolation. The people affected by colonialism also, as Homi Bhabha argues, cross borders of geography, culture, and power, in turn changing their own culture as well as that of the dominant society. Shanna is able to overcome her sense of alienation by engaging with the vitality of the present. While the film invokes the beauty and sense of spiritual energy she finds along the Grand Pine River, Shanna is also literally able to play her drum during the New Year's eve conclusion to her road trip to Niagara Falls with her eccentric aunts (identified in the credits as Matriarchal Clowns/Aunts), one of whom won the romantic getaway trip at a bingo game. These women manage to match the kitsch of the Falls but the film asserts, as Paul Chaat Smith suggests in his commentary on *Honey Moccasin*, that "At a time when pan-Indian pop has become a tidal wave and Indian identity seems like a question many of us answer with skilful accessorizing, *Honey Moccasin* suggests that being Indian takes more than feathers and beads."<sup>8</sup>

This second of Niro's films again seeks to transform native stereotypes in a narrative of the hybridity of border crossing. The main character Honey is a single parent who runs a suc-

cessful club, the Smokin' Moccasin, performs with her own band, Honey and the Mock-A-Sins, and, when the community needs help to solve the mysterious theft of pow-wow outfits, she transforms herself into a detective. Her chief rival is Zachary John, the son of the couple from whom Honey bought her club with money she won in the lottery. Zachary feels "robbed" of the club that he believes he should have inherited; in response, he has opened up the rival Inukshuk Café, hoping to steal away Honey's customers, and to turn her club into the "Token Moccasin," by outfitting his place with the new technology of a Karaoke machine and the sale of health food and bottled water. Of course, inheritance and the shifts of taste within the marketplace are as random as bingo and lottery. Success at these games of chance are one of the few ways that ordinary people can transform their economic condition but these are predicated upon the redistribution of wealth among class-bound participants rather than through social justice. In any case this twin theme of wealth and robbery is measured against the film's invocation of the wealth of tradition—a tradition itself measured not simply in material artifacts but in the creative process of community formation.

The style and thematic concerns of the film are humorously signified in the design of the opening credits. Names of the lead performers are formed out of rope work,



Elijah Harper in *It Starts With a Whisper*



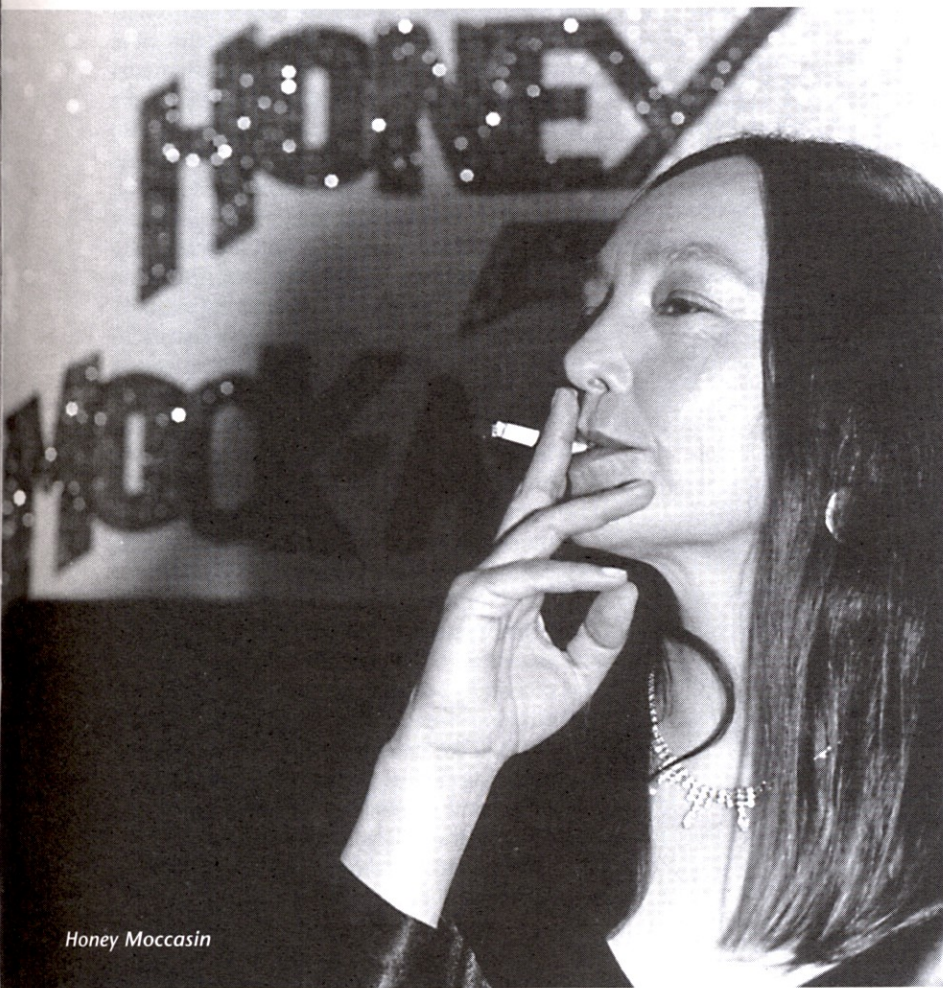
and these are illuminated by an unseen man holding a match. He voices emphatic expressions of approval as he illuminates each name, and expressions of surprise each time the match he is holding burns down to his fingertips. He lights a new match several times, finally resorting to a flashlight to illuminate the film's title. What is suggested is the resourcefulness of the hand-made object, an extension of tradition, and the self-effacing joke of the crude technology of the matchstick combined with the complex ideologically-determined apparatus of cinematic representation. This concern with representation is central to the film's efforts to subvert conventions of looking at native peoples. Following the opening credits, we see the broadcast of the Grand Pine Reserve "Native Tongue News" program. The technology of power and control is appropriated for use by the local community which, ironically, broadcasts in English. Here, we learn of the pow-wow costume thefts. The broadcast then continues on a television visible in the background of Honey's club, with a story commemorating the contribution of natives to the military forces during World War II, an interesting choice given the marginalization of native veterans and the relationship between war and the colonial conquest of space, suggesting the larger political and economic forces which come to bear upon the production of space and place. These forces are brought into the reserve through systems of power and mass media representation and are then used in the formation of community, raising the question of

how identity is spatially maintained and transformed.

We see Honey in the foreground as the television plays. She begins to tell a story of origins, of her birth and then of her parents' death, an oral passing-on of knowledge against the spatial presence of the mass-mediated grand narrative of official history. Her story is entirely bound up with language as a system of power, and the mediating process of the mass media. After she is born in a hospital located off the reserve, her father brings some fruit for her mother and asks what she would like. The very white nurse enters and asks what the baby's name shall be as the mother quietly says, honey, melon. The nurse cheerily notes the uniqueness of the name and declares that she will change melon to Melanie. After she leaves the room, the father deadpans: "I'm glad I didn't bring any bananas." The sly joke points to the embeddedness of colonial power in the control of language. This funny scene continues the critical project of undermining the function of language in the erasure of culture. As James Patten suggests in commentary on an exhibit of Niro's photography: "Niro's unconventional construction of image and identity points to a more ominous aspect of Native history. Her use of novelty and spectacle point ironically to a history of misrepresentation of native culture in late nineteenth century photography. Posed by whites for a mass market, Indians were often depicted in a pastiche of tribal costumes staged to achieve the highest degree of exoticism."<sup>9</sup> It is the production of a usable, and indeed spectacular,

self-image on the part of the Grand Pine community that is set against mass-mediated identity in the events that follow.

But first, Honey recalls that her parents watched a lot of television in her formative years, and, in the cold war context, it seemed to convey important information. That is to say, history and value happened elsewhere in the grand events of imperial conquest whether in the narrative of missions to outer space or on the ground during the Cuban Missile crisis. Absent from the media narrative is of course the important resistances to imperialism on the part of aboriginal people throughout the world. In the story she tells, her parents were on their way to town in order to purchase a new television antenna when their truck stalled on the railroad tracks just as a train approached, marking the discord of the native community with the spatial reorganization accompanying these systems of communication: the railroad and the mass media. Television remains a determining influence of Honey's and when she begins her sleuth work to find the pow-wow costumes we see quick shots as she goes through several costume changes, each obviously appropriated from television iconography, and suggesting the constructedness and performance of identity. She pauses at the Wonder Woman inspired outfit and then opts for the faux masculine authority of a Sherlock Holmes-style coat, hat, and oversized magnifying glass. In this



Honey Moccasin



way she provides an antidote to television's accelerated co-optation of the world. If the film on the one hand suggests the loss of tradition in accord with the disposability of images within media culture, it also suggests the creative force of appropriation.

On the trail of cultural theft, Honey traces a path of feathers to Zachary's Inukshuk Café. The café logo is an Inukshuk figure dressed in chef's hat and holding a knife and fork. Just as Zachary hopes to steal Honey's customers, he has appropriated this icon of traditional northern culture and refashioned it in accordance with his needs. While one could, on the one hand, describe this appropriation as inappropriate and inauthentic, First Nations culture must not be simply understood as connected with the notion of timeless tradition signified by traditional iconography. In any case, the appropriation is a double-displacement, as this icon is foreign to the more southerly located First Nations, belonging to the Inuit. Cultural survival and growth is, as I have suggested, marked by adaptability to circumstance. Zachary's café is not drawing in large crowds, but his initiative is tolerated with good humor by the members of the community. He sells products brought in from outside the local community, while an Inukshuk is erected with material close at hand (rocks, blocks of ice, or snow), but the long history of First Nations contact with European society involves the continual negotiation of appropriation and transformation. This creative hybridity is emphasized by the community's subsequent adaptation of found objects as material out of which the stolen costumes are refashioned.

The fashion show fundraiser held at Honey's club is a transformation of the traditional pow-wow into a spectacle through which cultural tradition can continue. The wake of southern culture's ephemera forms the material for the new costumes, with beads replaced by Fruit Loops, lollipops serving as feathers, bottle caps for the woman's jingle dress, and a suit of armor made out of inner tubes, among other spectacular costumes. This mise-en-scène suggests both the resilience of native culture and the impossibility of living that culture separate from white influence. What is important here is that "influence" is not understood in a master-slave hierarchy but as a presence that is encountered and reconstituted in the ongoing formation of community. As Deborah Root points out, when the Canadian government banned the potlatch ceremony and confiscated ceremonial objects under threat of imprisonment, communities well understood that they could always make more objects, but that they could not make more Elders.<sup>10</sup> Beads were objects of exchange before the influx of currency, but now cold cash is required to heat up the process of costume making. When the collection hat is passed through the crowd and Zachary reluctantly reaches for his wallet, he mistakenly drops a few feathers. These objects force recollection of the swindle by which much First Nations land has been appropriated through token payments.

The legacy of colonialism is, in turn, the subject of Mabel Moccasin's performance art, as the announcer states: "Honey's daughter, little Mabel Moccasin, will now show us what she does at film school." What she demonstrates is a creative navigation through tradition and the new,

using the tools of mass media representation and her own body as a screen for the projection of cultural images. Her act also speaks to the inter-generational continuity and change of the historical narrative. Mabel is dressed in a costume shaped like a teepee, and recites the lyrics to the pop song "Fever" as slides representing the effects of colonialism, residential schools, and cultural genocide are projected onto her. Chris Gittings describes the performance as cultural resistance: "These images of the 'doomed primitive' are denaturalized as fallacious colonial discourse by Niro's incorporation of them in living, contemporary Aboriginal culture performed by a living Aboriginal artist for a living Aboriginal community."<sup>11</sup> Gittings emphasizes, and I agree, that the integration of performance in "lived" space set against the colonial ascription of native culture as of the past, draws attention to the material and performative processes through which culture is created and maintained in dynamic encounters with other social forces rather than as something that is fixed and undialectical. But while on the one hand the song references the power and energy of First Nations peoples, it is a pop song metonymically connected with the structuring force of the system of power overlaid onto indigenous space, even as it

*It Starts With a Whisper*





is metaphorically an expression of personal desire.<sup>12</sup> As Mabel sings the first lyrics "Never known how much I love you, never known how much I cared. When you put your arms around me, I get a fever that's so hard to bear" an image of several nuns holding native children is projected onto her body and the energy of "fever" is revealed as the virus of assimilation. Yet it is not presented as a simple dichotomy. The song is about desire and connection, and the multiplicity of images prevents a singular view of native experience. We see that the image of tradition is not formed in a discrete space but is bound up with the present.

Culture is demonstrated as something that is performed, whether literally through the surfaces of the fashion show or in the depths of analysis provided by Mabel's act. This performance forms a particular understanding of place. The pow-wow costumes must be recovered as they are identified, by Zachary's father, as necessary to the preservation of tradition, but culture is about change—it is the performative response to circumstance. If Mabel's act is more complex than the fashion show, it is another instance of culture as performance, as a surface through which we navigate the depth of history. What follows is a Karaoke performance at Zachary's café, the assembled audience members laugh hysterically at the awkward performance. While this act is, on the one hand, merely a bad rendition of an already tedious country and western song, it functions as a means of binding together members of this community. It is, in the very least, a use of mass media that, while transmitting cliché, is less alienating than privately-viewed television. These space-binding activities are public performances set against the following scene of Zachary, alone in the basement of his café, performing in drag with the stolen costumes. The scene begins in a way that mirrors Honey's earlier transition into sleuth by trying on different costumes, and then involves the taking of Polaroid self-portraits, like home-spun narcissistic pornography. He is literally wearing tradition on the surface of his body, and his performance is a navigation through multiple positions of identity, as First Nations man and as homosexual, as a drag performer and bourgeois small business owner. Spatial relations are integral to the formation of identity, first as something that is relational and literally in this case as something formed in private space and at odds with the community. The subsequent reintegration of Zachary into the community is instructive in the narrativization of relations between identity, technology, and spatiality.

When Zachary is caught and arrested, he states that he should move back to "Pluto," the other-worldly referent that is given to a nearby urban centre (Toronto?). His rehabilitation into the community is not through banishment and the experience of dislocation but through forgiveness and public confession. He participates in a telethon-style television broadcast in which costumes are presented and owners are invited to phone in to reclaim them. Here, the mass media is used to reintegrate the community and while the costumes are returned to individuals, the public broadcast privileges the collective over private ownership. Zachary's "Fever" is the greed of private property and corresponding alienation, and the cure is public performance. In turn, there is no indication, within the diegetic fantasy space of the film, of hostility or isolationism expressed toward Zachary in response to his sexual identity. The film concludes with a title card indicating one year later and the presentation of another of Mabel's film school projects, a black and white film called "Inukshuk" fea-

turing Zachary as lead performer—fully integrating the creative application of communications technology with markers of tradition in order to articulate contemporary cultural experience.

This experimental film poem (using text by the poet Daniel David Moses) explores the theme of identity and urban alienation, with the character of Zachary performing the search for cultural markers of belonging. The anthropoid shape of the Inukshuk suggests an internalization of this search process, and as we see a shot of Zachary the voice-over states: "You were built from the stones, they say. Positioned alone against the sky here, so they might take you for something human" in turn relating identity to the physicality of place and the land as the literal ground of meaning against the postmodern tendency to constitute nature as sign. The images begin with remote landscape and then cut to desolate urban places, and the poetic narration links these together like a gentle breeze, suggesting that identity is formed through a process of seeing (while we also see discarded papers blowing along the city streets). References to hunting are juxtaposed with images of reproduction and self-destruction. The figure in space, the Inukshuk and Zachary's body, are the vertical extensions between earth and sky, simultaneously held up and cast down by the materiality and desires of culture. At the conclusion of the film we see Zachary embraced by his father, linking the disparate spaces of Native tradition and urban experience. The non-narrative film within the film is at odds with the spatial and temporal coherence of the main narrative, yet it is another way of using media representation to articulate the flux of identity formed in the dialectical relation between history, tradition, community, and place.

**Darrell Varga** has a Phd from the Department of Social and Political Thought at York University and is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, Popular Culture, and Film at Brock University.

#### Notes

- 1 Lloyd Wong, "Mohawks in Beehives," *Fuse* 16:1 (Fall 1992): 38.
- 2 These films are available for distribution from the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre [www.cfmcc.org](http://www.cfmcc.org) and from Women Make Movies [www.wmm.com](http://www.wmm.com).
- 3 Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), p. 36. The author makes a useful distinction in the use of the terms Indian and Native. The former refers to the stereotypical construction of identity in dominant North American society.
- 4 Shelley Niro, exhibition catalogue, *From Icebergs to Iced Tea*, co-curated with Victoria Henry (Thunder Bay and Ottawa: Thunder Bay Art Gallery-Carlton University Art Gallery, 1994).
- 5 Gerald McMaster, "Living on Reservation X," *Reservation X*, ed. Gerald McMaster (Fredericton and Hall: Goose Lane Editions-Canadian Museum of Civilization), p. 19. This important exhibit of contemporary Canadian native art was held at First Nations Hall, Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1998.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 8 Paul Chaat Smith, "Shelley Niro: Honey Moccasin," in *Reservation X*, p. 111.
- 9 James Patten, catalogue essay, *Shelley Niro: Sense of Self* (London, ON: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1994), p. 5.
- 10 Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference* (Boulder CO: Westview, 1996), p. 192.
- 11 Christopher E. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 239.
- 12 The distinction between metaphor and metonymy, the latter connected with material reality (a part related to the whole), the former an imaginary construct which substitutes for and idealizes the material world, is made by Michael Ryan and Doug Kellner, *Camera Politica* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 15.



# Border Crossings

## REPRESENTATIONS OF NORTH AMERICAN CULTURE IN BRUCE MCDONALD'S *HIGHWAY 61*

by Rochelle Simmons

Bruce McDonald's *Highway 61*, which came out in 1991, is centrally concerned with Canada's America.<sup>1</sup> It is a road movie that explores the North American continent from Thunder Bay to New Orleans, representing United States society and culture from a Canadian perspective. I will argue that far from providing a realist view, it is one that is mediated through literature and music, and that relies upon comedy, caricature, stereotype, and myth.

The images of Canada and America, to which I will be referring, are drawn from a body of literature about the representation of national identity and culture within filmic and literary texts. The film makes an effort to convey ethnic and geographic diversity in its inclusion of French-Canadian, East Indian, Manitoban, and Northern-Ontarian characters. Likewise, its representation of the U.S. includes African-Americans, Southerners, and Mid-Westerners. Thus, while the film's perspectives are largely English-Canadian, they are situated within a pluralistic context. I have resorted to generalizing about things Canadian and American for the sake of convenience, in the knowledge that identities are far more multiple, fluid, and specific than this sort of cross-cultural comparison allows. Should my concepts sound unitary and unifying as a result, I would like to endorse their provisional nature.

*Highway 61* begins with Pokey Jones, a trumpet-playing barber from Pickerel Falls, Northern Ontario, finding a man frozen to death in his backyard. Jackie Bangs, a roadie, claims that the dead body belongs to her brother, and that she must take it to New Orleans to be buried, although she is really using the corpse as a suitcase for drugs. Jackie tries unsuccessfully to hitchhike, before Pokey offers to transport the coffin on the roof of his car. Mr Skin, who believes he is Satan, pursues them along the highway, because the dead man had signed a pact with him relinquishing his body upon his death.

Along the way, Pokey pays tribute to various musicians associated with the regions he travels through. For example, he visits the house where Bob Dylan spent his early childhood and is filled with a sense of awe. Pokey makes the Dylan allusion in the title of the film explicit, when he proclaims: "*Highway 61's* a song. When you travel south on Highway 61 what you're really doing is tracing popular music back to its roots. I lived on the northern tip of this highway and I studied and I read. I've never left home, but I know every inch of this highway." Correspondingly, the soundtrack of the film pays tribute to popular music by playing songs that represent its periods and styles. Beginning in a barber's shop, and hence evoking the barber shop quartet, the film includes heavy metal, folk, rock, pop, country and western, soul, blues, zydeco, and jazz, with song lyrics complementing the spoken narrative.

The road movie format of *Highway 61* recalls the journey in Jack Kerouac's Beat Generation novel *On The Road* (1955), in





which two youths criss-cross the United States, hitch-hiking, stealing and destroying cars, in mad pursuit of women, drink, and poetic and religious self-enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Like Walt Whitman, they seek to embrace the geographic and mythological immensity of their land and they celebrate experience for its own sake. Sal Paradise speaks of "the great raw bulge and bulk of my American continent" (67) and he asserts that Dean Moriarty's criminality, which leads him to steal cars, is "a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy," since he steals them for joy rides only (11). This novel celebrates and fetishizes the car itself: Sal swears that Dean's very soul is "wrapped up in a fast car, a coast to reach, and a woman at the end of the road" (190).

McDonald's film also employs the road journey as a structuring device. There is some similarity between the "cross-country rampage" Jackie embarks on and the journey in Kerouac's book. But Jackie's purpose in making the trip is to smuggle drugs across the border: she is impelled by her "care-free, criminal" nature, rather than by a quest for enlightenment. Pokey's ostensible reason for visiting the United States is to help Jackie take the body to be buried there, yet he is also lured by the chance to visit New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz. If Jackie's behavior could be said to recall that of Dean and Sal, Pokey's attitude reflects their idealistic desire for knowledge and experience.

Significantly, the road movie to which *Highway 61* makes most frequent intertextual reference, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), is cast in the Kerouac mold.<sup>3</sup> Its two protagonists set out "looking for America." They are therefore explicitly engaged in a quest for spiritual and national identity; indeed, one of the main characters is called Captain America. *Easy Rider* uses tracking shots to celebrate the dramatic beauty of the United States landscape and the freedom and expansiveness of its wide open spaces. The film also conveys the thrill of motorbike riding and of the road itself. Although *Easy Rider* adopts a more radical counter-cultural stance than *Highway 61*, the journeys in these films are quite similar, since Captain America and Billy smuggle drugs from Northern California to New Orleans accompanied by a rock music soundtrack. However, whereas *Easy Rider* ends in an explosion of apocalyptic violence, *Highway 61* concludes with a gently ironic vision of salvation.

Film critics have argued that there is something quintessentially American about the road movie genre. In *The Road Movie Book*, Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark write:

The myth of the road has its origins in the nation's frontier ethos; in the twentieth century, technological advances brought motion pictures to mass audiences and the mass-produced automobile within the reach of the ordinary American. When Jean Baudrillard equated modern American culture with "space, speed, cinema, technology" he could just as easily have added that the road movie is its supreme emblem.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, David Laderman claims that the genre contains a "dialectical tension between the road film as a rebellious critique of conservative authority and as a reassertion of a traditional [Euro-American] expansionist ideology."<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, Geoff Pevere has called the road movie "a deeply Canuck form" for reasons he does not explain.<sup>6</sup> However, this statement appears to acknowledge what he has described elsewhere as the centrality of Don Shebib's film *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) in defining English-Canadian cinematic identity.<sup>7</sup> Both Pevere and Chris Byford have noted the ways in which McDonald's film pays homage to Shebib's, since *Goin' Down the Road* has been credited with initiating a series of "loser" films within English-Canadian cinema, with which *Highway 61* can be classified.<sup>8</sup> Although much of *Goin' Down the Road* is set in Toronto, it uses the road as a device for referring to specific locales and for dramatizing the declining fortunes of the protagonists, two Nova Scotian drifters.

Like Kerouac's novel, *Highway 61* depicts the car as a fetish object. But instead of rendering the automobile in macho, heroic terms, McDonald does the obverse by making Pokey claim that after the death of his parents in an electrical fire, the car was all that he had left of them, and thus it came to represent his parents to him. He turned to the car for advice and showed it his report card. Rather than use it for the common purpose of cruising and picking up girls, he kept it in the garage for an occasion of which his parents could feel proud. Hence, far from aiding sexual conquests, Pokey's car stands *in loco parentis* and his treatment of it suggests he is sexually inexperienced. McDonald, therefore, ironically subverts the U.S. worship of the automobile and typecasts Pokey as a bit of a loser.

Canadian commentators have pointed to a prevalence of losers in their cultural representations. Margaret Atwood suggests that the heroes of Canadian novels "survive, but just barely; they are born losers" who fail "to do anything but keep alive."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Pevere acknowledges the high number of "losers roaming around [in] Canadian films."<sup>10</sup> The degree to which Canadian nationality seems to preclude success in *Highway 61* is demonstrated by the taunts Jackie hurls at Pokey when he claims to be a musician. She says: "You're no fucking musician, you're a barber, a small-town barber, a Canadian." Indeed, Pokey can be seen as an inversion of the famous New Orleans musician Buddy Bolden, who has acquired legendary status as a cornet-playing barber, a womanizer, and the originator of jazz. Although Bolden's profession as a barber has been discredited, his reputation as a ladies' man and his extraordinary ability to play the trumpet are well-documented.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, the virginal Pokey is a better barber than he is a cornet player. In a review of *Highway 61*, Brian D. Johnson describes Pokey as a "comically meek Canadian dreamer" who is "afraid to blow his own horn."<sup>12</sup>



The following excerpt from the film suggests that Pokey's French-Canadian friend Claude is also a loser:

**Mr Skin:** "Want to be rich? Want your own tv series? All it's going to cost you is your soul. Hey, what do you say little boy? I mean, you want to get out of this dinky town. Move to the States. Live on a yacht the size of a football field. You name it, you got it. Now what do you want?"

**Claude:** "Are you serious?"

**Mr Skin:** "Dead serious!"

**Claude:** "Beer, you got any beer?"

What interests me is how, when the small-town boy, Claude, is offered Hollywood fame and fortune, he asks for beer instead, which suggests that he is a hoser who lacks the ambition to become a success in American terms.

Yet, the humorous self-deprecation of this episode perhaps also questions such achievement. Atwood claims: "Americans love success, worship success," while "Canadians are suspicious of success."<sup>13</sup> It seems that, for some Canadians at least, achieving success in the United States means selling one's soul. This suspicion is no doubt fueled by the U.S. domination of Canadian mass culture. John Meisel argues that

Canada's cultural vulnerability vis-à-vis the United States is manifest everywhere. Book publishing, the periodical press, film production and distribution, comic books, the record industry, theatre, dance, popular and so-called classical music — have all been dominated by foreign influences in Canada. The indigenous product has had an exceedingly hard time getting started and surviving.<sup>14</sup>

Since Canada tends to define its national identity in cultural terms, in that the arts are believed to reflect and mold the nation's self image, then selling out to Uncle Sam could be said to betray what Canada stands for.

As an aside, *Highway 61*'s non-Hollywood features are worth noting in this context. It is a small-budget production that employs little-known actors, none of whom conform to Hollywood standards of glamour or beauty. The film focuses more on character than plot, it is not an action film, there is little sex and violence, and the romance that underlies its happy ending is undercut. Location shots tend to be mundane rather than scenic and there are no spectacular special effects.

The putative contrasts towards winning and losing, which I discussed earlier, have a bearing upon each country's myths. A 1986 cover article in *Saturday Night* magazine, called "Beautiful Losers: A Canadian Tradition," adapts the title of a Leonard Cohen novel and draws some cultural inferences from it.<sup>15</sup> The article notes that Canada is "[n]ot quite a country where dreams come true, not exactly a land where the good guys always win. . . . Losses . . . marked our steady passage" (25). In other words, the Canadians have no equivalent to the American dream.

In the United States, itself, of course, the dream is not always borne out by reality. As Pokey and Jackie embark on their journey, Pokey describes the chance to see America in romantic terms, as a "dream come true." His unmaterialistic desire to "just follow the highway all the way, . . . from the Lakehead to the Big Easy," is not difficult to fulfill, even if the route turns out to be more circuitous than he imagines. What,

one suspects, will be less easy to achieve, is Mr Watson's wish for his untalented singing-and-dancing daughters to become stars. When he declares: "I want the world for those girls. Anything this world has to offer, those girls will have. This country has an awful lot to offer and I want them to have a crack at that," we suspect that his hopes will never be realized. Furthermore, those who achieve the consumerist dream are not necessarily happy. Jackie's rock musician friend, Otto, boasts: "We've got a swimming pool, a sauna, a weight room, recording studio, we've got a frozen yogurt machine! Everything you need for living! You hardly ever have to step outside." Yet, Otto and Margo resort to drugs and chicken shooting to combat their boredom and Margo flirts with suicide.

The depiction of Satan in *Highway 61* appears to largely derive from American images. Cinematically, his presentation draws upon Film Noir and Horror devices, in the prominent use of darkness and shadows, and in the under lighting that emphasizes his ghoulish aspect. Mr Skin's Southern accent, his demonic behavior, and his sleazy appearance all seem to indicate his affiliation with the Southern Gothic tradition to which Flannery O'Connor belongs.<sup>16</sup> O'Connor's emphatically non-realist stories, with their extremes of violence, emotion, and insanity, on the one hand, and their satire and sardonic humor, on the other, largely correspond in tone to McDonald's portrayal. A committed and theologically-informed Catholic, O'Connor deliberately exaggerated human failings in order to demonstrate the mysterious workings of divine grace.

In contrast with the religious intensity of O'Connor's vision, McDonald's Satan is clearly shown to be a phony whose supernatural power does not extend beyond his magic knowledge of bingo. Deprived of his one-and-only chance to extract a soul from a dead body during a pyrotechnic performance to his neighbors, Mr Skin pours gasoline on himself and on the photographs of his would-be victims, and ignites it. Less apocalyptic and more tongue-in-cheek than O'Connor, McDonald nevertheless includes what might be interpreted as a revelation of grace at the end of his film. After she arrives with the coffin in New Orleans, Jackie has a change of heart: she refuses to relinquish the drugs to the dealers, and, in a ceremonial gesture, sends the coffin down the Mississippi River towards the ocean. As if to emphasize her reformed attitude, Jackie then immerses herself in the water, in an action that evokes a baptism in O'Connor's short story "The River" (1948).<sup>17</sup> When Jackie emerges from the Mississippi, her outlook is transformed and she is able to appreciate Pokey and his trumpet playing for the first time. The humor inherent in Jackie's appreciation of Pokey's rather bad playing undermines any seriousness in this scene.

The film also tips its hat at U.S. novelist William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), in which the Bundren family undertakes a journey fraught with disaster in order to bury their dead wife and mother.<sup>18</sup> This novel belongs to the same Southern Gothic genre as O'Connor's writing. Just as Faulkner's coffin suffers a series of tragicomic misadventures, including being set on fire and dumped in a river, the car carrying the coffin in McDonald's film is torched and the body is committed to a watery grave. If Faulkner's portrayal of rural Southerners in ludicrous situations draws in part upon comic stereotypes of "poor white trash," so, too, does McDonald's depiction of the Watson family. The Watsons, in turn, seem to pay homage to the Jackson family, which provides the archetypal popular cultural example of ambitious parents pushing their young chil-



dren to perform as singers. Indeed, Michael Jackson's fame is referred to in this episode.

The relation between Pokey and Jackie might also be said to allude to U.S. fictional sources, but it is given a Canadian twist. At the outset of the journey, they seem to embody the kind of contrast between innocence and experience that Henry James presents in his novels. Yet, instead of having a shy, moralistic American man gain insight into human nature from a worldly, corrupt European woman, such as we encounter in *The Ambassadors* (1903), both characters are Canadian, although the man is innocent of, and the woman is familiar with, the United States.<sup>19</sup> Despite having been born in Wilmington, Manitoba, Jackie describes herself as coming from "all over," and she exhibits behavioral characteristics that some Canadians ascribe to Americans.

Political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset claims: "Efforts to distinguish Canada and the United States almost invariably point to the greater respect for law and those who uphold it north of the border."<sup>20</sup> Pokey is shown to be law-abiding when he tries to persuade Jackie not to hitchhike with a coffin, because he suspects that her action is illegal and constitutes an "interstate traffic violation." Jackie's lawlessness is demonstrated by her drug smuggling, her theft, and her propensity to point a gun at people and at billboards. These differing responses to the law represent contrasting attitudes towards authority and rebellion. Literary critic Gaile McGregor states that, unlike in the United States, "the [Canadian] culture hero is not the gunslinger, triumphing over opposition by a demonstration of his natural powers and anarchistic individual will, but rather the Law itself: impersonal, all-embracing, pre-eminently social."<sup>21</sup>

Such contrasts between the U.S. and Canada are predicated upon notions of Canadian distinctiveness. While the phrase "North American" acknowledges the amount the two countries have in common, Canadians have historically insisted upon their separation from the States in an effort to define their national identity. Lipset writes:

The effort to create a form of rule derived from the people, and stressing individualism made America "exceptional," to use Tocqueville's formulation. The desire to build free institutions within a strong monarchical state made Canada distinctive, different from its mother country but also from its sibling across the border (1).

If comparisons and contrasts between culture north and south of the 49th parallel could be said to constitute the primary focus of the film, *Highway 61* gets much comic mileage out of literal and metaphorical border crossings.

In the actual border crossing, Jackie and Pokey encounter two threatening, insinuating border guards who seem chiefly concerned protecting against and detecting sexual promiscuity and deviance. Of Jackie's many convictions, the male guard interrogates her over those for indecent exposure, and the female guard all but accuses Pokey of homosexuality, because he does not have a wife and children. As Byford states, "[t]he irony here is that it is the Canadian, Jackie, who is being stereotyped as the violent interloper when in fact the reverse is often more common" (15). The fact that the male guard — who is overly concerned with preserving the sanctity of his own home, which is how he characterizes the United States —

is played by Jello Biafra, the ex-lead singer of the punk rock band The Dead Kennedys and an anti-establishment bad boy, is doubly ironic.

Of course, border crossings can be metaphorical as well as literal, as McDonald seems to imply. Once Pokey has left Canada and arrived in the United States, he says: "There's a different way of doing things down here. You notice a big change as soon as you cross the border. Hard to believe, but everything you hear about America is true." Given Pokey's inability to recognize what is going on around him, we should probably greet his remark with some skepticism. But whether the distinctions *Highway 61* draws between Canada and the States are "true" or not, they appear to derive from a body of cultural practice within both countries. Although they are not to be taken at face value, they do provide an indication of how America is represented from a Canadian perspective.

**Rochelle Simmons** is a lecturer in English at the University of Otago in New Zealand. She has published articles on New Zealand cinema and Canadian Literature

## Notes

- 1 McDonald, Bruce, dir. Script by Bruce McDonald and Don McKellar. *Highway 61*. Film. Toronto: Shadow Shows, 1993.
- 2 Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. (1955). New York: Viking, 1985. All subsequent citations are to this edition.
- 3 Hopper, Dennis, dir. Script by Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Terry Southern. *Easy Rider*. Film. Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1969.
- 4 Cohan, Steve, and Ina Rae Hark, eds. *The Road Movie Book*. London: Routledge, 1997. The quotation is taken from the back cover.
- 5 Laderman, David. "What a Trip: The Road Film and American Culture." *Journal of Film and Video* 48: 1-2 (1996): 41-57. The quotation is taken from pp. 41-2.
- 6 "Letter From Canada." *Film Comment* 28. 2: (1992): 61, 63-65. The quotation is taken from p. 64.
- 7 For a discussion of Shebib's film see Pevere's *Letter From Canada*; his "On the Road Again: The Making and Unmaking of a Canadian Classic." *Take One* 8 (1995): 5-13; and also Chris Byford's "Highway 61 Revisited," in *Cineaction* 45 (1998): 10-17.
- 8 Byford's article makes some similar points to my own concerning the loser paradigm, the American dream, and selling one's soul. I first proposed these ideas in a paper delivered at the Fulbright Conference in 1995, of which this article is a rewritten version.
- 9 Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972: 34.
- 10 Pevere, Geoff. "Images of Men." *Canadian Forum* 64 (February 1985): 24-28. The quotation is taken from p. 24.
- 11 Donald M. Marquis, in his book *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) uses a biographical and historical method to debunk the myths that have grown up around his subject. His opening chapter is entitled "Exposing the Legend."
- 12 Johnson, Brian D. "Rock 'n' Roll Highway." *Maclean's* 105.7 (1992): 64. Johnson quotes Macdonald [sic] as having described Pokey Jones as an inversion of Buddy Bolden.
- 13 Atwood, Margaret. Produced by Stephanie McLuhan. *O Canada, Eh!* Videocassette. Toronto: McLuhan Productions, 1986.
- 14 Meisel, John. "Escaping Extinction: Cultural Defence of an Undefined Border." *Southern Exposure: Canadian Perspectives on the United States*. Ed. and intro. David H. Flaherty, et al. Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1986: 152-168. This quotation is taken from p. 153.
- 15 "Beautiful Losers: A Canadian Tradition." *Saturday Night* (1986) 25-31.
- 16 Following a screening of *Highway 61* on 8 December 1994, I asked Don McKellar whether he had used O'Connor and Faulkner (whom I go on to discuss) as sources for his Southern characters in writing the script and he confirmed that he had. He also mentioned having included references to Buddy Bolden.
- 17 O'Connor, Flannery. "The River." *A Good Man Is Hard To Find And Other Stories*. (1948). San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1981.
- 18 Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. (1930). New York: Vintage, 1990.
- 19 James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. (1903). Ed. S. P. Rosenbaum. New York: Norton, 1964.
- 20 Lipset, Seymour Martin. *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. New York: Routledge, 1990: 90.
- 21 McGregor, Gaile. *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Landscape*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985: 61.



## The Consequences of Seduction

ADOLPHE

reviewed by Florence Jacobowitz  
and Richard Lippe

Benoit Jacquot's *Adolphe* was screened at the 2002 Toronto International Film Festival, and elicited little response. The local press ignored it, the public did not welcome it at the screening we attended, and the influential trade paper *Variety* wasn't enthusiastic. The film will likely not receive North American distribution which is unfortunate as it is an intelligent, disciplined and creative work. In part this speaks of both contemporary attitudes towards the classical melodrama and films that are demanding. The film is based on a famous early 19th Century novel by Benjamin Constant about a young man, Adolphe/Stanislas Merhar, who seduces a woman approximately ten years his senior. Ellenore/ Isabelle Adjani, once conquered, gives herself over to the relationship, abandoning the count/Jean Yanne, her protector, and her children. Adolphe cannot match her grand gesture. He is uncertain about his love for her and hesitant to dedicate himself fully to the relationship. The film depicts the battle of wills and needs that ensues. Ellenore wants a total commitment from Adolphe. Adolphe sees this as a claim on his freedom and masculine privilege. Ellenore, having sacrificed her name, reputation and children cannot accept anything less.

In dealing with the theme of seduction, love and its ramifications, the film explores the underpinning network of gender and power that fuels the social world in which they move. Beneath the surface of courtship rituals and clever repartee are profound issues that lead to life and death choices. The narrative, with its sacrificing heroine, is familiar terrain of the melodrama. (Jacquot's previous film is an adaptation of *Tosca*). Max Ophüls' career, for example, was largely devoted to this subject matter (Ophüls long wanted to film Contant's *Adolphe*.) 'The Model', the closing episode of Ophüls' *Le Plaisir* (1952) was based on a short story by Guy de Maupassant and offers an interesting comparison. In the episode, a man, an artist, pursues a woman, a model, and after a conquest, he quickly loses interest in her. The woman insists on accountability and attempts suicide by

jumping out of a window when the artist announces he is ending the relationship. (The film's cynical male narrator, who is also a participant in the narrative, voices his contempt of the woman's demands on the artist and his freedom.) The episode ends with a bitter irony. In the final shot, the viewer sees the artist and model together as a couple; he has become her caretaker as she crippled herself in the fall.

Like Ophüls' *Le Plaisir*, Jacquot's *Adolphe* is complex in style and content. From the outset, the viewer is privy to Adolphe's thoughts through his voiceover narration; the film, however, doesn't solicit emotional identification with the character. The film encourages the viewer to take an analytical position. The pacing is slow and deliberate and marked by the repetition of a phrase of music which serves as a form of punctuation. We know from Adolphe's own words that he has calculated the seduction and grows tired of it once it is achieved; however, Ellenore gradually usurps and overrides Adolphe's control of the narrative. We see her vulnerability once she has committed herself to Adolphe, and witness her perform a series of transgressive acts, including the abandoning of her children, which bond her to him. The magnitude of Ellenore's commitment creates an emotional disturbance with which the viewer must contend. At the same time Adolphe too becomes increasingly vulnerable as he loses his footing in a familiar world that structures and codifies masculinity. He isn't prepared to confront the excesses of Ellenore's behaviour and her demands. (Adolphe, like Rodolphe in Minnelli's *Madame Bovary* (1949), thinks he is enjoying an affair with a worthy conquest. Ellenore, like Mme. Bovary, wants more than what is offered; both narratives use the situation to demonstrate the limits of the woman's position and the severe consequences that can result.)

Adolphe rebels against his father's insistence that he take control of his life and end the affair. Adolphe, who in appearance and temperament isn't hard and overbearing, continues to care for Ellenore and, sensitive to the suffering he has caused her, cannot simply abandon her. Given the presentation of the protagonists, the situation and their respective positions, the narrative prevents the viewer from an easy championing of Ellenore's sacrifice over Adolphe's refusal to fully capitulate to her. Adjani's Ellenore is a strong-willed uncompromising character

who refuses to understand Adolphe because her sacrifice is so extreme and total. As initially seen, Ellenore, who is of an aristocratic family, has constructed, after a failed marriage, a safe haven for herself and her children with the count. Despite the fact that she does not love the count, she respects him and their arrangement which is comfortable for her and provides many social privileges. (In part Ellenore's arrangement with the count reflects her wariness of male relationships. In an early scene Adolphe eavesdrops as she reads a bedtime story to her children; the story is *Bluebeard* and it is used to emblemize her distrust and awareness of the threat implicit in normative marriage.) Adolphe's destruction of Ellenore's world when she becomes a woman with a ruined reputation, is what fuels her insistence that Adolphe uphold his responsibilities as her lover. In a shocking sequence an elderly aristocrat comes uninvited to Ellenore's home after she has left the count, and physically accosts her, demanding that she accept him as her disgrace leaves her few alternatives (and little protection). The event leads to a duel in which Adolphe is compromised by the fact that the older man is the offended party. The man shoots first and misses Adolphe, who then takes his turn and kills his opponent. Adolphe has defended Ellenore's honour and the incident helps to bind the couple in their notoriety; however, he equally resents how the demand works to impinge on his freedom and identity.

Jacquot points to the magnitude of Ellenore's emotional experience as a result of her sacrifice in a number of remarkable scenes. In one scene Ellenore's children are playing in the park with their nanny, and one child asks for their mother. The camera finds her in the foreground of the image, highly distraught, hiding behind a large tree, masked from her children's view. In a similar scene after she has abandoned her children, Ellenore is seen dressed in black, alone in a church pew, sobbing. A funeral is taking place in the church and her children and their nanny enter the church behind her and leave without either acknowledging the other. These parallel scenes underline the profound emotional trauma of Ellenore's experience. The culmination of the toll taken on her occurs in the scene in which the count, riding in his carriage, finds Ellenore wandering the country road in a state of dishevelment and disorientation



(reminiscent of Adjani's career-making role in Truffaut's *The Story of Adele H*, 1975.)

The count gently and generously offers to accept her back, with the condition that she give up Adolphe. Ellenore rejects the offer by demanding to leave the carriage. Through these scenes Jacquot indicates the cost of Ellenore's commitment to Adolphe, and that her actions increasingly overstep the bounds of social mores. The consequences of seduction for Ellenore is a loss of self-preservation and a movement towards the edge of an emotional breakdown. These pressures eventually lead to Ellenore's physical illness and suicide.

In *Adolphe*, Jacquot, like Ophuls in *Le Plaisir*, counterpoints distance and observation with an acute and intense portrayal of the tragic consequences of a relationship that has no place and can't be contained within social parameters. Jacquot's tone is contemplative and at times ironic. Again, like Ophuls, he situates his characters in a complex social context that shapes both their identities and their choices. In one scene Ellenore writes an emotionally charged letter to Adolphe who has returned to Paris in response to his father's command. Through off screen narration Adolphe informs the viewer that he has safely returned to his life in Paris and is enjoying his privacy and a leisurely existence. Ellenore's letter (read in her voice) announces her decision to follow Adolphe after a set period of time if he fails to send for her. The directness of her tone markedly challenges what Adolphe's voiceover masks. She is next seen walking to a post box and mailing her letter. The letter is then followed on its journey, tossed in with a large number of letters that will be sorted and sent. Her letter becomes one of many such letters (and the passions contained) making its way through the postal system. The scene also suggests, by implication, that Ellenore's is one of many complicated lives trying to communicate needs and desires within a mundane world. It is an example of Jacquot's subtle but pointed connecting of the personal to the social; he is not diminishing the significance of the letter but he is placing Ellenore's emotional predicament against the banality of everyday existence.

Jacquot's *Adolphe* develops its narrative through detail and nuance in keeping with the codes of social propriety at work. The film respects the tone of the period rather than contemporizing it for the viewer's accessibility. (Jacquot's faithful-

ness to his material, on the other hand, may be a reason why the contemporary viewer feels distanced from the narrative and its characters.) One small instance of this is when Adolphe is in Paris and wishes to end their relations. He sits down to compose a letter which he hopes will ease him out of the relationship while keeping with the proprieties and exigencies of the situation, given Ellenore's abandonment of her protector and her children.

Adolphe keeps downgrading his involvement by crossing out and changing 'love' to 'affection' to 'friendship' to 'devotion'. He is highly sensitive to codes of behaviour and his self-image, and wishes to fulfill his obligations to both Ellenore and himself while making it clear that he considers their affair is over.

The film's final movement (a movement away from social life towards a personal accounting for both Adolphe and Ellenore) entails a shift in location from France to Poland. Adolphe and Ellenore are at a lake side resort (and Adolphe's appearance at her side announces his decision to defy his father who has banished Ellenore from Paris) lying side by side on lounge chairs. Given the character's garb it is probably late autumn. Ellenore announces that she has received word that her father is dying and the implication is that a return home would allow her to claim her inheritance. Adolphe encourages her to go but Ellenore refuses unless he accompanies her. The conversation is conducted with both characters wearing sunglasses and avoiding eye contact, lying prone and very still, looking ahead to the lake and beyond. When Ellenore threatens that she will not leave alone, Adolphe becomes furious, saying that he has given up his life for her and is overwhelmed by her pain and feels as if he is dying. He also says that he no longer loves her. The scene is charged by Adolphe's abrupt outburst and complete loss of composure. Ellenore, on the other hand, remains composed; her prone position and veiled face suggesting mortality and signifying death.

There is a direct cut from this scene to Poland in the winter time, with Adolphe, Ellenore and her loyal servant arriving to the news that Ellenore's father has just died. The cut again wordlessly announces that Adolphe has succumbed to Ellenore's demands. The denouement in Poland is structured by Adolphe's growing reluctance to remain with Ellenore and her increasing desperation to keep him. In

one scene she hosts a party and dresses provocatively, flirting with the male guests in order to provoke Adolphe's jealousy and desire for her. Adolphe admonishes her for losing her self-respect, and Ellenore's excessive costume and behaviour indicate her decline. Adolphe finally announces in an admission by letter to his patriarchal substitute, the French attaché in Poland, that he has resolved to break his ties to Ellenore. The attaché forwards the hand-written note to Ellenore, without Adolphe's knowledge, in order to seal the decision. The result of the plot is that Ellenore suddenly becomes desperately ill; Adolphe sees the letter and understands the cause of Ellenore's self-inflicted suffering, and asks her to start anew. While Adolphe still speaks of his profound affection, Ellenore understands at last that he could never match her love and eventually, dying, accepts defeat. She summons him and tells him that she has written him a letter which she asks that he not read and makes him swear that he will burn it.

Ellenore's death, like Camille's, or any number of heroines of melodrama, is less a punishment to the hero for his inability to match her passion, than an acknowledgement that the woman's transgression cannot be negotiated or accommodated in the social world. After the funeral there is a shot of Adolphe imagining Ellenore's resurrection and her movement towards him to caress him. It is a shocking moment as the viewer, along with Adolphe, imagines that Ellenore has returned from the grave to demand that he accompany her; Adolphe then says, in a voiceover response, "I no longer want to be free." This admission is an acknowledgement of his love for and need of Ellenore, which has been overshadowed by his fear of self loss and of being consumed by a strong obsession. The vision functions to articulate his recognition of Ellenore as a soul mate.

The final scene of the film features Ellenore's maid, who has remained silent throughout, approaching Adolphe and insisting he take and read Ellenore's last letter. The maid has been an ever present, loyal caregiver to Ellenore, wordlessly observing the relationship (the character can be compared to John, Stefan's mute butler, in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, 1948). Her class and gender prohibit direct comment or intervention so this independent gesture of delivering the letter and insisting he take it, particularly after Ellenore has begged Adolphe not to



read it, is a bold one, and marks her protest or revenge. As Adolphe reads the letter, Ellenore's voice is heard off screen speaking words that evidence she has willed her death and that Adolphe will come to profoundly feel her loss. The film's concluding shot is a close up of Ellenore, in slow motion, turning and looking directly at the viewer against a black backdrop, appearing troubled and helpless. Jacquot gives Ellenore the last word and image; it is her image that haunts the narrative. Overall the film leaves the viewer with a sense of loss and regret. The last shot echoes the film's abstract opening image where Ellenore, ghost-like is calling 'Adolphe' and he turns, looking haunted. In many ways Adolphe and Ellenore are mirrored (at one point Ellenore tells him "we resemble each other."). Adolphe's final understanding that he no longer wishes to be free connects him and Ellenore; he has learned to appreciate her conception of devotion (much like Stefan who joins Lisa in death at the end of *Letter From an Unknown Woman*.)

Ellenore is a character of great strength, intelligence and determination. Her directness and open articulation of the dynamics of the relationship unsettles Adolphe and undermines his initial presumption of male dominance. Isabelle Adjani's star presence contemporizes the strong romantic heroine of the woman's novel and it is not surprising that Adjani approached Jacquot with the project. Constant's own relationship with Madame de Stael was the basis of the novel and the characters make reference early on in the film to de Stael and the question of a woman's place. In their first conversation regarding women, Ellenore looks at Adolphe and remarks that "women should remain in the domestic realm—as opposed to 'blazing a trail'—as all else brings suffering." The film is, in many ways, a lamentation on this theme—choosing a path beyond the domestic leads to self-destruction. This is in line with the tradition of the woman's novel and the melodrama. Interestingly, Jacquot's, *School of Flesh* (1998), with its contemporary setting, has close connections to *Adolphe*, dealing similarly with the complexities of gender relationships and the social regulation of love and desire.

Melodrama is dependent upon style, and Jacquot's use of colour, mise-en-scene, costume and lighting constructs narrative meaning, shaping the nuances of the genre. Jacquot confronts the mater-

ial without a post-modernist filter that signals a particular response from the viewer. *Adolphe* is demanding in that it draws on the conventions of the melodrama but revitalizes these through its original and rigorous formal approach. It may not be a film that appeals broadly to a contemporary audience, but it was one of the most accomplished and moving works screened at the festival.

## The Intended

reviewed by Robin Wood

I thought Kristian Levring's *The King Is Alive* one of the finest, most fascinating films I saw in the 2000 Toronto Film Festival. I appear to be in an invisible minority over this. The press screening was very sparsely attended, I read no reviews of the film anywhere, and it has still, two years later, not had a release in Canada, either theatrically or on video. This is the more surprising in that it has an international 'name' cast, including Jennifer Jason Leigh, Romane Bohringer, Janet McTeer and Bruce Davison. Surely, at least, someone will have the enterprise to bring it out on DVD. In view of this apparent blanket rejection I had begun to wonder whether I was completely wrong about it, but *The Intended* convinces me that I was not. I hope it doesn't suffer a

similar fate. (Note: I cannot write about this film with any adequacy without giving away its plot, which is built upon surprises. If it is available in any form when this is published, I ask prospective readers to see the film first).

Taken together, the two films are a gift to auteurism. True, *The King Is Alive* was an official Dogme film and *The Intended* isn't, but its staging/shooting methods, if somewhere outside the strictures of the celebrated 'Vow of Chastity', remain reasonably chaste: the entire action takes place within a single location and the film is nowhere afflicted by 'special effects', cheating over spatial relationships, or the kind of razzle-dazzle editing that seeks to prevent one from noticing that the characters couldn't possibly be doing what we are supposed to believe they are doing. In short, an *honest* film, such as is no longer the norm today.

Thematically, the links are very strong. *The King Is Alive* was built partly on the premise that it might be helpful for people *in extremis* to act out *King Lear* rather than try to deceive themselves or simply blot out their situation. (Perhaps the reason the film has not been distributed is that few people today under thirty seem to know the difference between King Lear, Edward Lear and Evelyn Lear, nor be in the least worried that they don't). *The Intended* abandons Shakespeare, but not the 'feel' of the Elizabethan/Jacobean tragedy/melodrama: the latter term,





which didn't exist then, seems today the more apposite to such works as *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, or *The Revenger's Tragedy*. I would describe Levring's film as a Jacobean melodrama set about three hundred years later, a genre marked by passion and excess, crime, treachery, violence, characters driven to extremes of behaviour, a consistently high emotional voltage.

The basic premises of the two films are also startlingly similar: a group of people isolated, far from their native culture, in a primitive environment (the desert, the jungle), unable to contact anyone for help, with no apparent hope of rescue, struggling to survive either nature or their own fellow-humans or both, driven to extremities of desperation and action. Ultimately, both films are about the testing of character in extreme circumstances, the relentless exposure of one's ultimate nature. From this viewpoint, one of the things that gives the film its distinction is that it contains such surprises while convincing us of their logic. We come to realize that the surprise comes from our own cinematic conditioning: the character development refuses (for example) to conform to the expected course of guilt/retribution/punishment/remorse/suicide that would be the typical cinematic consequence of hideously murdering one's own mother. Deprived of this, we have to make an adjustment, yet the film's own logic seems completely convincing.

Janet McTeer co-wrote the screenplay with Levring and has the central (indeed, the *title*) role, though this only becomes apparent gradually and she never 'hogs': if the film is a 'star vehicle', it is also very much an ensemble movie, with a uniformly perfect cast. McTeer is magnificent. Some may find her 'over the top', but this is an over-the-top movie filled with over-the-top situations, about people who are driven over the top by circumstances (as well as by each other): a 'melodrama of excess', a perfectly legitimate (if not always popular—some are embarrassed by it and the film might at times evoke nervous laughter) sub-genre. It is also, ultimately, a woman's melodrama, although at first Hamish/JJ Feild is the dominant character (though we are already very much aware of Sarah as a powerful presence), taking charge, making decisions (to abandon his job and return to civilization tomorrow, when denied his promised half-pay). The film has him progressively reduced in power and authority, marginalized, and

finally rendered completely helpless (unconscious, perhaps dying), as Sarah rises in strength, takes charge, makes decisions (though some are forced on her), discovers herself. Above all, Sarah surprises us; Hamish doesn't, or never to the same degree.

But is William/Tony Maudsley (or, more precisely, the way in which the film allows him to develop) who surprises us most. (One cannot but wonder what censorship, where it still exists—e.g., Ontario's notorious so-called 'Review' board—is going to have to say about this. But our censors seem exclusively preoccupied with explicit sex, so perhaps they won't notice). William begins as a stereotypical creep and loser, the 'castrated' son totally dominated by his mother/Brenda Fricker (who runs the isolated jungle trading-post, controls the finances, and can choose her successor); we feel for him nothing but distaste and contempt. The filmmakers' decision to have him murder her in a particularly grotesque and sadistic way is important: we are certainly not meant to endorse or pardon it. Nor do they make the mistake of presenting her as wholly monstrous: no character in the film is simple, we are made to understand that Mrs. Jones, a woman forced by circumstances into a male role, and a precarious one at that, has become what she is from necessity, and we are allowed glimpses of genuine, if partly suppressed, human qualities. William is never punished for his monstrous crime, neither does he ever show remorse. Instead, he regains his manhood and the self-respect he forfeited when he returned from his British university, confidence, dignity and (eventually) generosity. I cannot think of a film that has offered a more disturbing challenge to our moral sense, with this suggestion that, indeed, nothing is simple.

The challenge is reflected in the development of Sarah. Her husband is dying of some unspecified jungle fever; William's doting aunt (who previously helped him out by masturbating him) is the only person who knows the cure; she will save Hamish's life if Sarah will give herself to William. Horrified and disgusted, Sarah initially refuses, but acquiesces when the aunt adds to her 'payment for services' the money that will make escape possible. Sarah invites William to a romantic candlelit dinner, but (not quite inadvertently) lets slip that she is being paid. The early (pre-murder) part of the film led us to expect that William would attempt to rape her; now he is shocked that she is making

herself a 'whore', and rejects her, clearly for her own sake. This leads Sarah, in her turn, to begin to see a different William. They develop a mutual attraction, and when they make love it is not only to save Hamish's life. Further, the film makes it clear that Sarah experiences with William a degree of physical pleasure she has never had with her intended husband...

*The King Is Alive* was already striking for the unpredictability of its development. In my opinion these two films, taken together, indicate a major talent, notable for its refusal to accept without challenge the moral norms of our culture and the familiar progressions of our narratives.

## Unknown Pleasures

reviewed by Shelly Kraicer

*Unknown Pleasures* (Ren xiao yao, 2002), Jia Zhangke's latest feature film, is a poetic, ruminative drama about two young drifters (first-time actors Wu Qiong as Xiao Ji and Zhao Weiwei as Binbin) and a professional dancer (*Platform's* Zhao Tao as Qiaoqiao) mired in a provincial backwater. That backwater is Datong, a city near Mongolia noted for vast, now-idle state-owned factories. Datong featured as the primary location of Jia's digital video documentary short *In Public* (2001), a film which reads, in retrospect—with long, plotless takes of various semi-decayed urban public spaces, populated by anomalously cheery or passively defeated people—like a trial run through *Unknown Pleasures'* themes and preoccupations.

In Jia's new feature, the prevailing mood of suspended animation is inflected by a wry, impishly mocking sense of humour lurking just behind every scene. As a businessman in the film declaims: "art sets the stage; let the economy perform on it". But Datong's economy is hardly performing, except around the margins, where erotic massage parlours, pool halls, and a charmingly traditional opera theatre seem to flourish.

Xiao Ji's sullen slacker affectations, worn with an almost charismatic panache, fail to contain a sudden reckless love he abruptly catches for gorgeous Qiaoqiao. She's sold out *her* art to a liquor promoter with gangster connections: she performs her updated minority dance routines on outdoor stages in dusty abandoned lots, to attract potential customers to



Mongolian King Liquor. Xiao Ji's best friend Binbin is unemployed. Headed nowhere in slow motion, he can no longer connect with his girlfriend Yuanyuan (Zhou Qingfeng) who is on the fast track to university in Beijing.

Events on the surface of China's political life in 2001 constantly intrude via televised news reports: Falun Gong arrests, the shooting down of a US military plane, Beijing winning the 2008 Olympics. Though bits of violence burst into the narrative – a mysterious explosion hits a factory; a gun suddenly appears – the film's real subject concerns movement and stasis, progress or stalled oblivion. Jia's masterpiece *Platform* (Zhantai, 2000) was about time: its epic reach showed its characters mired in, caught by a sense of time passing and changing that they could barely cope with. *Unknown Pleasures*, as *Platform's* companion piece, is obsessed with space. Its model of China today is made up of a series of recreated public spaces, for which Jia has created a new poetics of *mise-en-scène* that perfectly captures the dry, dead feel of its onscreen spaces, and the sadness of hopelessly, infinitely extensible offstage space. Its dynamic lies in its characters' struggles to carve temporary, fragile private zones out of the collapsing public space that post-communist China can no longer sustain – the dirty backseat of a minibus, a chintzy private video theatre, a semi-private theatre booth. Its most potent and ambivalent symbol is the vast bus station/pool hall/community centre where much of the action is set. This concrete-ribbed warehouse, dark, decayed-utilitarian, full of empty air and echoes, is colonized for disreputable public (gambling, loan sharking) and private purposes by city dwellers who seem, despite their ingenuity and industry, completely dwarfed by and lost in the vastness of the space.

Jia's newest intervention into the politics of China's culture offers a precisely shot, re-visualized sense of space fracturing and reconstituting itself under enormous social pressure. One of the most exhilarating and liberating experiences I know in cinema today is watching Jia's constantly evolving cinematic language as it invents new ways for us to see.

With thanks to Senses of Cinema ([www.sensesofcinema.com](http://www.sensesofcinema.com)), where an earlier, shorter version of this review appeared in issue 23, (November-December 2002).

## Making and Remaking Class in Ken Loach's Recent Films

reviewed by Scott Forsyth

Ken Loach has always been a favourite of the Toronto International Film festival. In 1991, he was featured with a complete retrospective and his new films premiere each year, celebrated at festivals though not often theatrically released. Of course, Loach does not fit the cynical right wing times, he is the master filmmaker of the working class, and his militant socialism has never wavered. His extraordinary body of work over 40 years – *Cathy Come Home*, *Kes*, the magisterial *Days of Hope*, *Hidden Agenda*, *Riff-Raff*, *Ladybird*, *Ladybird*, and *Land and Freedom*, to name just a few – offers a panoramic but intimate exploration of working class politics and everyday life, particularly in the British isles, but always internationally conscious as well. Loach's films have powerfully addressed the politics and betrayals of unions, strikes and revolutions, the painful daily struggles with family, sexuality, race, housing, poverty, drugs and alcohol, the contradictions and inhumanity of the welfare state, the solidarity and oppression of the workplace; every aspect of working class life interests his humane realism. That realism has outlasted the censorship battles that marked so many of his early television films and has survived in its power and popularity despite the ignominious targeting of Loach by the sectarian Screen Theorists of the seventies.

Loach's is a cinema of emotion and analysis, sometimes didactic (and that is not always a bad thing), always partisan. But victories are few and far between, triumphs often solely of working class spirit against overwhelming odds.

Over the last decade, Loach's films have repeatedly come back to the ravages of and struggles against the ruling class offensive known as neo-liberalism. The attack on working people's living standards, wages and unions, the relentless erosion of the social, health and educational provisions of the so-called welfare state, the polarization of rich and poor, the familiar mantras of privatization, deregulation, free market magic are all too well known. If this onslaught is still emblemized by Thatcher and Reagan, it is now generalized as blatantly imperialist globalization, borne by the World Bank, the IMF and American military might. Loach's films of the last few years have looked prismatically at where working people stand in this epochal change and the restructuring of class relations, from the workers' eyes.

*Bread and Roses* (2000) is set within a recent victory, at least partially, for working class struggle: the successful organization and strike by janitors in California, largely illegal Mexican immigrants. The film is a celebration of class militance against the brutal new conditions of low-pay contingent service work, but characteristically Loach focuses as much on the personal costs and pain of that struggle.

*The Navigators* (2001) takes us right within the heart of Thatcherite Britain, to the virtual opposite of the California optimism of the janitors' small triumph. The film offers a series of tableau's among the

*Sweet Sixteen*





workers of a British Rail maintenance crew. The narrative spine is provided by the privatization of this public corporation, a legacy Blair has continued to pursue despite years of accidents and scandals. The film centres on the relationships among the men and a few women in the workplace. Written by a former rail worker, the stories give viewers a privileged access to what the day's work is like, what workers talk about, how they act with each other, how they fight and joke. But this goes beyond a simple idea of naturalism. Indeed, the scenes of banter, debate and anger in the cafeteria are marvels of editing and camera movement; this constructed style of realism makes us feel the camaraderie and the unstated emotions. This is exhilarating but, poignantly, dissipates as the privatization takes its apparently unstoppable course. We watch the painful layoffs and buyouts, the absurd and dangerous contracting and sub-contracting of work, the ruthless profiteering of a succession of owners, finally turning workers against workers in desperate competition for work, any work. We reach a painful climax in a terrible accident but Loach's concern is as much what has been lost among the men, what sad individualistic stratagems they are now left with. We gradually realize that the film resonates with an almost complete absence of political or trade union discourse – no one presents an analysis, a courageous last stand for what previous generations had won. This is what makes the privatization seem so unstoppable, this subtle ideological indication of the depth of crisis and defeat. If the film's comic energy belies this pessimism, we still know that the class confronts a profoundly changed and

daunting class terrain.

*Sweet Sixteen* (2002) presents a much different angle on class conflict and day-to-day struggles. It is set in Glasgow in a working class area once home of the great Clyde shipyards and, though never acknowledged in the film, the heart of the famously radical Scottish trade union movement. The area is now largely poverty-stricken projects, product of de-industrialization and decline, and this painful coming of age tale follows young Liam's adventures in the drug trade. The film, which won Best Screenplay at Cannes, immerses us naturally in this world with a thoughtful narrative structure, evocative casting and rapid-fire dialogue. Loach, a masterful actor's director, elicits wonderful performances, particularly from the young inexperienced actors. As in many American films, dealing drugs is presented as an entrepreneurial response to, and embodiment of, the neo-liberal times. For the immiserated lumpens left behind by Thatcherism, drugs seem to offer solace to some. To others, dealing offers economic survival, and the only route to class mobility still open. Liam's motives are painfully ironic and touching; as so often in Loach's films there is a difficult and complex family history. He is trying to get enough money together so his Mom, in jail taking the rap for her no-good drug dealer boyfriend, can start a new life with Liam when she gets released...on his sixteenth birthday. To raise the money, Liam has to show a real talent for dealing drugs, betraying his friends and manoeuvring with the refined but ruthless "rich cunts" who really run the business. Even with his success at this dirty business, Liam finally has to confront the fact that his idealized Mom does not want the life he imagines for them, that even our loved ones may not be just what we want them to be. So there is no stirring rhetoric to answer the film's bitter ironies and unresolved contradictions. The film concludes sadly, there are no epiphanies, no slogans. Perhaps, there is an optimism of the spirit in the feeling that this memorable Liam could still make his own story in this perilous place and time.

Loach offers us clear-sighted and unsentimental, but deeply emotional and generous, pictures of how contemporary capitalism is making and remaking class – and how working class people, heroes of a kind, sometimes fight back, sometimes just endure.

## Fruit Chan's 'Excremental Vision'

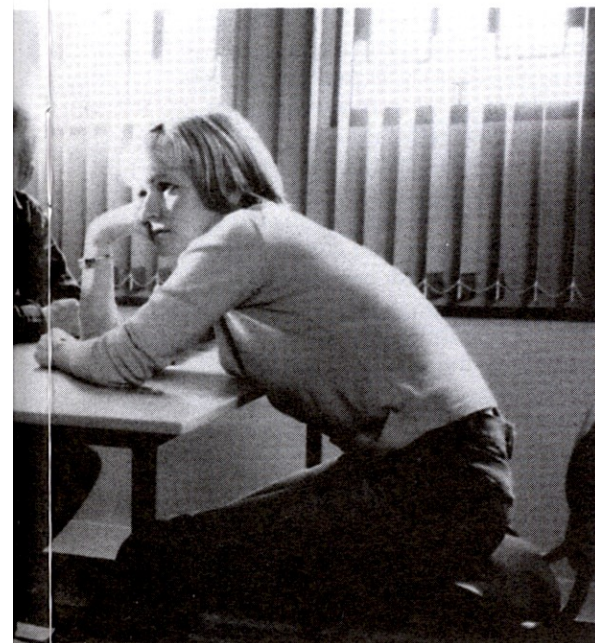
### PUBLIC TOILET

reviewed by Susan Morrison

What can you say about a film that sticks your nose in public toilets, literally as well as metaphorically? As Fruit Chan proclaimed at the Question and Answer session after the screening of *Public Toilet* at this year's Toronto International Film Festival "...this is my shit movie."

Fruit Chan's reputation as one of the most interesting directors of the new Hong Kong independent film scene was firmly established by two highly acclaimed 'neo-realist' films that critiqued the 'hard-scrapple' life in Hong Kong after repatriation. *Little Cheung* (1999) and *Durian Durian* (2000) were both screened in 2000 at the TIFF, although due to an unfortunate mix-up the version of *Durian Durian* had Italian subtitles only. The third film in his 'prostitute' trilogy, *Hollywood Hong Kong* (2001), not shown in Toronto, continued in the same realist vein as the previous two, with the addition, however, of one of the most ingenious yet off-putting pre-film title sequences that I have ever seen....the titles and credits stamped (branded?) onto the pink flesh of slaughtered pigs being transported in a truck by 2 overweight men and an equally fat young boy. While the grossness of the imagery prepared the viewer for the coarse realities of the narrative of *Hollywood Hong Kong*, in retrospect, it also gave promise of the more scatological effects to come in Chan's next film.

*Public Toilet* is undeniably about toilets: in Beijing, where the most primitive kind of public toilet...an open room with seats facing each other... serves as a communal centre for socializing as well as birthing and dying; in Korea, where the toilet in an outhouse becomes the home for an 'Ocean girl' ill from eating polluted fish waste; in the Indian city of Benares, itself a public toilet whose inhabitants relieve themselves freely in the streets; its river, the Ganges, revealed as a conduit for human dirt and waste, notwithstanding its purported powers of healing; in Hong Kong, where an Indian family tends a public toilet; and in a public washroom in New York City, where a homeless man





inadvertently intervenes in a mob hit with tragic results.

In fact, much of *Public Toilet* appears to be intentionally distasteful, in an 'épater le bourgeois' kind of way. We are confronted with shots of rivers of urine through which people swim; a glass of urine which a young man is coaxed into drinking; discussions of 'virgin's golden urine' as a potential cure-all; a story recounted of a court doctor who diagnosed health by observing and sniffing the patient's bowel movements; a hand pulling a newborn baby (a very obvious doll, thank goodness) out of the pit of a public toilet; documentary-type shots of people in the Indian sequences bringing their dead down to the river and burning them, with the camera lingering on the shreds of burned flesh.

This overt and excessive emphasis on excretory functions and products is somewhat mediated by a narrative that attempts to capture the expanded realities of life in the 21st century. While *Public Toilet* was directed by a Hong Konger, Fruit Chan, it was entered in the Toronto Film Festival as a Korean film, a not unusual occurrence these days as more and more (East Asian) film productions become transnational. One of the dominant features of the film is that it encapsulates the fluidity of contemporary life, transcending traditional boundaries and barriers of

geography, race, language. Cell phones are the dominant mode of communication, attached as they are to a body as opposed to a locale, and 'travel' becomes a metaphor for hope. The film extends its reach far beyond the geographic limits of Chan's earlier films. Mainland China, Hong Kong, South Korea, India and New York City figure prominently as loaded locales for the peregrinations of desperate young people searching for cures for dying loved ones. Dong Dong, from Beijing, with a grandmother who has had a stroke, travels to South Korea in search of Korean ginseng which he thinks will cure her; when disabused of that idea by a Korean doctor, he moves on to Manhattan. Dong Dong's friend Tony, who has a young brother with stomach cancer, goes to Benares in India to look for a possible cure. Jo, a young Chinese woman living in New York with her gangster boy friend Sam, travels to China's Great Wall district with her dying mother who believes that a mystic there will be able to restore her health. Two brothers of Indian descent travel with their sick father from Hong Kong to India so he can bathe in the Ganges river in the hope that its waters will cure him. Pointedly, however, what we arrive at, what the film seems to tell us, is that in the end there is no hope. None of the travelers finds a cure, magic or otherwise.

It's not clear what Chan was trying to do in *Public Toilet*. The film is oddly apolitical; no fingers are pointed at probable causes for the proliferation of illnesses afflicting so many of the characters. Unlike other Western films, this one is not about what modernization has done to the environment. The only toxic waste that is mentioned....that which has poisoned the fish whose own waste has been ingested by 'Ocean Girl' derives from human bodies rather than factories. At the same time, it doesn't appear to offer a social critique either; few of the various activities e.g. body burning, urine drinking, are condemned—the only instance is a Chinese shaman who is verbally attacked for his false promises of hope.

Let's hope that *Public Toilet* is Fruit Chan's only shit movie.

## When Fiction Turns Real

### SUSPENDING DISBELIEF

reviewed by Diane Sippl

Portentous winds from Germany's neighbor opened the 51<sup>st</sup> International Film Festival Mannheim-Heidelberg with 28-year-old Przemyslaw Wojcieszek's *Louder than Bombs*, a boisterous critique of wanderlust for the West with an eye to a new Poland.<sup>1</sup> The James Dean poster from *East of Eden* that graces the bedroom wall of Marcin, the film's young car mechanic, at once flaunts the ultimate American "cool" and shouts in the face of multinational hegemony. Marcin's mother died years ago and he has just buried his father. He sits in the house they shared, trying to find his direction. Why shouldn't Marcin ask his fiancée to forget about her scholarship to study abroad? The film asks if an alternative life in Poland—a cry for commitment "louder than bombs"—might challenge the last generation's hell-bent globalization. Shot in two weeks with talent known mostly outside the acting arena and using only one take for many scenes, the film boasts a strong local context. With speed, wit, and a hyper camera that audiences might not expect from the quiet Polish workers' town of Wrocław (Breslau), the film sparked debate on stances regarding dependency and acculturation. At the same time Przemyslaw Wojcieszek's spirit-





ed presence at the fest raised the curtain on a considerable repertory of first features by young cub auteurs bearing heavy hearts with lithe voices.<sup>2</sup>

When festival fans asked director Kei Horie whether the Japanese hold a special orientation toward death, he responded that he was tackling a big topic for his cohort in his diploma film at age 22, which he based on real stories he read and heard about. His compassionate *Glowing Growing* ponders the ironies of the freedom promised by an on-line ad for collective suicide.<sup>3</sup> Kominabu, having strangled his girlfriend in a fit of rage when her taunting struck too close to the bone, is sensitive to the overriding despair of his friend Jun following an attack by bullying peers. Feeling rejected, guilty, and afraid, the two buddies are acutely introspective and find reason to flee.

In an opening image, a shot of a red ocean fades to black. Nonetheless, their road trip by bicycle along a radiant Pacific (stylishly prefigured in a woodblock graphic) is a bold counterpoint to their flight from life. A long shot frames the shadows of clouds racing over green fields that line the shore. Moments later Kominobu, performing trance-like exercises in the dark of night, is spooked when Jun switches on a garden full of hanging lanterns. More vibrant still is their exchange of confessions when, by default, they bunk down together and find intimacy in sharing past humiliations. The rose glow of the room softens the effect of earlier red-tinted frames and emphasizes the character point of view so crucial to the film. For example, both Jun and Kominobu have their brushes with heaven, Jun with an angel on roller blades and Kominabu with God as an elegant young woman. All in life glows when the soul leaves the body, they learn from their surreal messengers. In their journey, each finds the fear of life compounded by a fear of death. Paradoxically, through this tender portraiture, writer/director/actor/editor Kei Horie sparks incredible charisma.

"Sing with your heart, not your voice," insists Eugenia Bassi, the century-old *grand dame* of Luis Ortega's enigmatic *Black Box*.<sup>4</sup> He wrote, directed and shot the film beginning when he was 19, casting his younger girlfriend, Dolores Fonzi, as the lead. While scouting locations he was struck by the enigmatic qualities of several local inhabitants. He asked them



Charlie Butterfly

to play themselves and shot the film in their homes, creating a bare scaffold of a narrative on which he mounted two of the lives he observed.

Its back-story never unraveled, *Black Box* works very much in-the-moment, chronicling the acquaintance of a teenage laundry worker, Dorotea (Fonzi), with a rickety older man, Eduardo Couget, who takes up residence at the Salvation Army upon his exit from prison. The camera tacitly surveys Eduardo's uneasy trek in real time as his body betrays an accumulated fear of life. He sits on a park bench where boys saunter past him sporting toy guns and tattoos and pretty little girls giggle at his strangeness. He is a living *calavera* that they behold through the invisible barriers they build to contain him.

"My idea," comments Ortega, who has opened his film with an abstract sequence of monkeys in a cage, "was to turn around the idea of what's beautiful and let people see how I see it... to show how people grow together without having to talk." Extreme close-ups and wry humor disclose Dorotea as Eduardo's daughter and also Eugenia's granddaughter and caretaker. "Ah, life — life. Don't flatten it," the 100-year-old woman retorts in the mirror as the girl grooms her, and she is probably not referring to her bouffant hair. Eugenia's lyrical gump-tion is matched only by the score's waltzes that place the film in the San Telmo district of Buenos Aires. Its fragile balconies and stately trees in the blue light of Ortega's lens render a melancholy hope, a persistent presence, enhanced by

frames of the district's Canto al Trabajo monument, its taut bodies united to push a boulder. Eduardo gazes upon it through a fence, in his own "black box" of existential loss and torture, a state of being "locked up" that precludes communication or relationships with others, a way of being that is at the peephole end of the camera. It lets us glimpse three generations of a family who, together for a moment, share a meal. *Black Box* enables us to withhold expectations. If the cinema can take us to a place we have never inhabited but that we somehow remember as ours, our black box in viewing Ortega's film is the potent silence of the imagination.

*Seven Days in Teheran* refers loosely to Reza Khatibi's life staged as the documentary of a French journalist's return to his native Iran.<sup>5</sup> It presents the simultaneous activities of any émigré: a countering of negative stereotypes of the homeland, a grounded critique of current conditions there, and the involuntary role of inciting debate upon return visits. Himself an exile who has been living in France for 16 years, Khatibi couldn't return upon his father's death until four years after the fact, a situation that is likely one of the most common crises of displaced persons today. Khatibi dramatizes this "fact of life" through a theme of death on multiple levels.

In the film, Reza's old friend Esfandiar is a former Sorbonne student who has returned to teach French literature at Teheran University but will not live to see the changes he dreams of in his country



because he is dying of cancer. When this politically astute poet performs a symbolic death by singing a song of protest he wrote for Reza years ago, Reza can't bear the pain of the reverie and loss; he retreats to the street where he collapses, a fall that resounds the fears of all who speak out. Nonetheless, Reza persists in documenting his visit and commands his French cameraman, Goldmund, to keep on shooting as young women at the university voice their needs upon penalty of death. "We depend upon cultural exchange from the West. Please don't boycott us on the Internet.... We are a generation that is being sacrificed. Maybe our children will be better off," they tell the filmmaker.

Khatibi's camera and boom on the streets of the city are enough to spur questions, Persian and French alike, by the mere fact of their presence — questions not only about Iran and its representation, but also about the power of fiction to document a world in the process of being discovered. *Seven Days in Teheran* is that process, and such a world brings incredible vitality to the screen.

If any trend could be detected at the Mannheim-Heidelberg festival this year, it was the tendency to make fiction films feel more real than any documentary. The small-scale technology of digital video cameras, the use of non-professional actors, and stories of real people — deriving from the settings in which they live and often told in real time — have all contributed to films organically tuned to the lived experience of the filmmakers and their casts. There is just one caveat: an Audience Award went most deservedly to Dariusz Steiness for *Charlie Butterfly*, a stunning feature debut that reads like a bluesy fairy tale of redemption set in the seemingly timeless world of "wonderful" Copenhagen.<sup>6</sup>

Can a cynical, bitter, emotional wreck of a man make music? Carsten Dahl's subversive acid-jazz score sung masterfully by the lead actor, Allan Wegenfeldt, rotates the question between father and son in *Charlie Butterfly*. Steiness uses fire as a catastrophic screen image, but even more so, he uses firemen as today's mythic heroes, "the people who save other people." Fireman Hans has to save himself if only in order to save his son, Jasper, who follows in his shadow. To call the father a miscreant would almost be flattery: Hans is a tyrant and is played with panache by

Vigga Bro, a veteran of 1960's Method Acting, who inspired the role. Hans insults his wife daily and beats Jasper for arriving to work drunk at the fire station. The cycle escalates as Hans blames himself for an accident that kills his wife and then attempts a feat of self-martyrdom with irreversible effects.

What amazes is the turn of events as father and son play out their desperate need for each other mediated, it must be noted, by two forceful women, each of whom can stand on her own. If the narrative transforms Hans into the Charlie Butterfly of Tess' bar as a small-time musician she is willing to host for her regular patrons, Jasper's story emerges from the songs he sings out from the cocoon of Charlie's piano. To witness Jasper's reluctant metamorphosis step-by-step in the aura of his formidable father is to discover Hans' biggest challenge but not his last, because it is only his delivery of Jasper to the world of confidence that gives Hans the strength to come out of his own shell to love again.

The film's dialogue is as sparse as it is symbolic. Nothing looks very realistic in *Charlie Butterfly*'s elegant, out-of-time architecture and foggy woods, but no computers were used to manipulate Steiness' lyrical images. With his strong background in cinematography and TV commercials, all his optical effects are in-camera work. His lasting result is the finely etched beauty of his theme, the very real capacity for change. Dariusz Steiness' aural-visual tour de force from Denmark offers immense rewards for spectators willing to suspend disbelief.<sup>7</sup>

**Diane Sippl**, PhD, is a film critic and programme advisor based in Los Angeles. she writes on contemporary world cinema and American independent filmmaking.

#### Notes

- 1 Contact for *Louder than Bombs* is available at: Skorpion Art, Uł. Chelmska 21 pok. 503, 00-724 Warszawa, Tel. +48 22 851 11 04, Fax +48 22 841 61 71.
- 2 Documentarian Michael Moore's acceptance speech for his Academy Award on March 23, 2003 brought the word "fiction" to the ears of millions with an uncanny twist — the images they were in the midst of clicking to on their remote controls as they cross-cut their own channel-surfed montages that evening between Baghdad and Hollywood were most likely, in their eyes, real. This year's Mannheim-Heidelberg festival was particularly invested in exploring the prescient power of the real in fiction, whether that fiction be artistically created or cynically fabricated and, as such, insidiously denied and disavowed. In

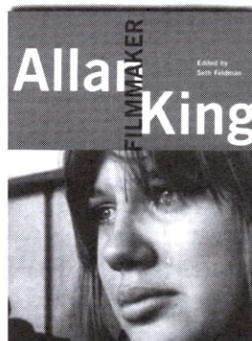
the eyes of the festival, what makes a young filmmaker an "auteur" might well be this difference in approaching fiction.

- 3 Contact for *Glowing Growing* is available at: New Media Generation (NMG), Daikanyama Saikane 7F, 1-33-14 Ebisunishi, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, Japan 150-0021 Tel +81 3 57 28 66 52, Fax +81 3 57 28 66 53.
- 4 World sales for *Black Box* is available at: Orler S.A., Pascual Condito, Riobamba 477, Capital Federal, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Tel +54 11 4373-7583, orler@primerplano.com.
- 5 World sales for *Seven Days in Teheran* is available at: Margarita Ségué, f for film, 16. rue de l'ancienne forge, 27120 Fontaine-sous-jouy, France, Tel +33 23236 8649, Fax +33 23236 8649, Seguy@f-for-film.com.
- 6 World sales for *Charlie Butterfly* is available at: Trust Film Sales, Avedore Tvaervej 10, 2650 Hvidovre, Denmark, Tel +45 3686 8788, Fax +45 3677 4448, post@trust-film.dk.
- 7 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations and information regarding the background of the film productions and the filmmakers is from interviews conducted with the directors by this author at the 51st International Filmfestival Mannheim-Heidelberg, November 7-16, 2002.

## BOOK REVIEW

### Allan King, Filmmaker

Edited by Seth Feldman  
Published by Toronto International Film Festival in conjunction with Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, with support from The Canada Council for the Arts, 2002. 111 pages.



### reviewed by Janice Kaye

In writing about Seth Feldman's monograph, *Allan King, Filmmaker*, I disclose having been a King fan since 1967, when I journeyed with a friend from the wilds of suburban Willowdale to a downtown Toronto theatre, by bus, streetcar and subway, to see this new, much-acclaimed Canadian documentary, *Warrendale*.

A letter I wrote King after seeing *Maria* on television was graciously returned with a hand-written note about words of praise



being "like ambrosia to a director." Our paths crossed briefly and coincidentally again, when I did some publicity work on *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Philip Marlowe: *Private Eye*, and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, as well as on the international seminar he headed on Canadian cinema, "The Forest from the Trees: A Canadian Cinema and How To Get It." Years later, we met in a Queen's University classroom when King was donating his papers and films to the archives and I happened to be a Film Studies undergrad there.

I was therefore interested in the personal, as well as the cinematically historical and theoretical, nature of Feldman's new book on King. The book comprises an overview and analysis of King's work in an introductory chapter by Feldman; a frank chapter by King on his apprenticeship as assistant editor at the new CBC station in Vancouver while he drove cab, and on his first film, *Skidrow* (1956); an insightful 1978 essay by Peter Harcourt on King's work, especially *Who Has Seen the Wind*; and a particularly revealing interview with the filmmaker by Feldman, Harcourt and Blaine Allan, in which the current voice of King admits to hating making films and being terrified by the process. Feldman writes in a clear and highly readable fashion, treading a line between journalism and academia that illuminates without sarcasm, cynicism, pontification or obfuscation. He clearly covers the wide variety of King's oeuvre, most of which is not readily available. The book is a sometimes breezy and often fascinating mix of professional and personal analysis (references to psychoanalysis included), with key themes and tropes running through the films illuminated, underlined or even contradicted by the filmmaker's own words.

By revealing details about King's impoverished and disruptive Depression upbringing as well as the political and social culture of the time, Feldman succeeds in fleshing out a portrait that pulls King's work together in a more accessible way than a stricter academic treatment would be able to accomplish. Historical details emerge not only about King but also about his contemporaries: it was, for instance, Patrick Watson's idea to make a film about the emotionally disturbed youngsters of Warrendale, while King had proposed profiling a British school for gifted children.

Some insight into King's process

comes from the inclusion of some of his film proposals/outlines, sometimes with handwritten notes in the margins, words crossed out and replaced. When, for example, King excises the phrase "dramatic action" in outline of *A Married Couple* and replaces it with "experience," the inextricable connection between Canadian documentary and fiction is underscored. The book also hints that Canadian documentaries have often provided more engaging characters than English-Canadian fiction features. I found interesting Feldman's assessment of King's documentaries as being "an eclectic defiance of the original divisions" within French and American *cinéma vérité*. Exploring the issues around this subject could result in a more extended study of the Canadian contribution to global *vérité*.

King's biggest feature, *Silence of the North* (1981), is somewhat dismissed by Feldman and King as a Hollywood production gone wrong. Where King's earlier "failure," *Mortimer Griffin, Shalinsky and How They Settled the Jewish Question* (1971) is justified as part of "a long apprenticeship as a director of dramatic films," *Silence of the North* is blamed on Universal Pictures. Although King already had directorial experience in feature dramas with *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1977) and *One Night Stand* (1978), both had relatively small budgets and box-office returns, and were typically extended Canadian character studies, one from a leisurely paced novel and the other from a claustrophobic play. While interesting, they lack the plot structure assumed to attract a general movie audience. With *Silence of the North*, however, there would be much more at stake. Feldman's acknowledgement that it was "generously budgeted" seriously understates the case: \$10 million at that time was enormous for a Canadian film. "Patricia Knopf's strong script about the awakening to self-knowledge of a unique woman" would not have been enough to recoup costs. What were the details or the germ of King's "[l]osing control of his own film," as Feldman states it? Did it drive him back to making smaller documentaries? Did the man who "as usual, learned from his mistakes" on *Mortimer Griffin* figure out how to recognize, create or story-edit a fictional dramatic script that enough Canadians and Americans would pay to see the way they would his documentaries? The tax-

shelter films seem to be off-limits for auteur discussion and their failure placed on dentists, accountants and producers. Writers and directors, however, can be held equally accountable. As it is, the film remains an interesting blend of Canadian and American narrative elements, suffering from the lack of dramatic conflict and plot structuring that afflicts most other Canadian features, despite American intervention.

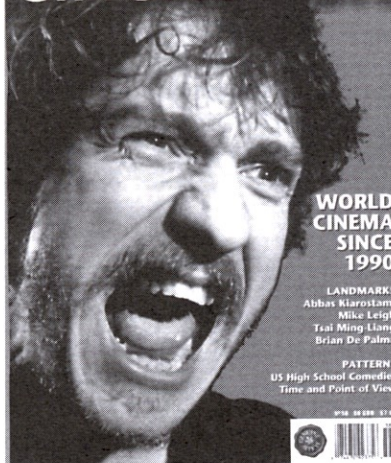
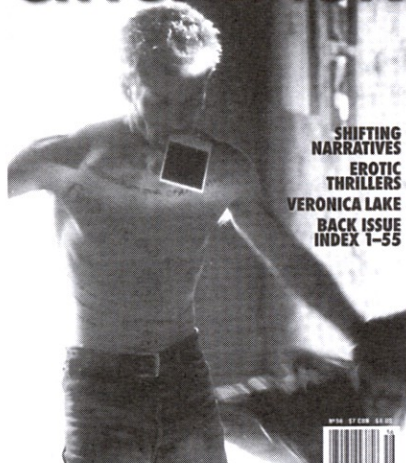
As implied in the book, Canadian documentary usually holds more drama than Canadian fiction, King's included. This is evident from the storm of controversy that greeted his documentary on the unemployed, *Who's In Charge?* (1983), which he produced and did not direct, according to the credits, and the relative lack of interest in his last feature film, *Termini Station* (1989), another in a series of downbeat Canadian family dramas, this one set in a mining town about the "trauma and despair" of "an alcoholic mother and her self-loathing daughter trapped in dead-end lives." While one could say that box-office returns are not the concerns of an artist, King claims not to be one. The cover photo chosen to sell the book on his life is from *Warrendale*; but it is of a full-lipped young woman with a tear trickling down her left cheek, very much resembling a young Julie Christie, an icon of British and American popular cinema.

Meanwhile, back at *Warrendale* in 1967, I remember being shocked and fascinated by this unfamiliar portrayal of young people in crisis, and then surprised when my teenage friend whispered in my ear during the film, "That's what I want to do." She became, and still is, a special education teacher. That's just one example of the influence Allan King's films have effected in the world.

After 46 years of making films, it is high time Allan King and his body of work were acknowledged in a book and Feldman's volume, aside from several easily caught typos, does an "elder statesman of his nation's cinema" proud. The chronological filmography of both film and television project at the end of the book is a particularly useful resource that obviates the need to consult various and numerous sources.

**Janice Kaye** is a Canadian doctoral candidate in Critical Studies at the University of Southern California in the School of Cinema-Television.





### BACK ISSUES STILL AVAILABLE

If you would like any of these back issues delivered to you, fill out the order form on the facing page.

- 1 Neglected Films of the 80s
- 2 Women in Contemporary Hollywood
- 3/4 Reading the Text (double issue)
- 8 Revaluation
- 9 Comedy
- 12 Teen Films
- 13/14 Film Noir (double issue)
- 15 Interpretation
- 16 Canadian Cinema
- 17 Re:Positioning
- 19/20 Critical Issues (double issue)
- 21/22 Rethinking Authorship (double issue)
- 24/25 Feminist Film Theory/ Criticism (double issue)
- 28 Canadas: Cinema and Criticism
- 29 Revaluation: Hollywood
- 30 Framing the Family
- 31 Narrative and Film
- 34 Modernism
- 35 Gays and Hollywood, Queer Cinema
- 36 Toronto International Film Festival Reviews
- 37 Movements: History and Filmmaking
- 38 Murder in America
- 39 Contemporary World Cinemas
- 40 Re-Readings and a Spike Lee Dossier
- 41 Style
- 42 Chinese Films
- 43 Films of the 90s
- 44 Performance
- 45 Canadian Cinema; Festivals
- 46 The Western: Then and Now
- 47 Anything But Hollywood
- 49 Canadian Films/Sayles/Third Cinema/Festival
- 50 Hitchcock & Cukor: SPECIAL 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIV. ISSUE
- 51 What Happened?
- 53 Horror
- 54 Screwball Comedy
- 55 Star Image Icon
- 56 Shifting Narratives
- 57 Film in Canada
- 58 World Cinema Since 1990
- 59 Max Ophuls Centenary
- 60 East Asian Cinemas

### SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES TO CINEACTION

Submission of manuscripts is encouraged. Hard copy of submissions should be mailed to the editor at:

40 Alexander St., # 705  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada, M4Y 1B5  
Telephone 416-964-3534

If accepted for publication, you will email the article to an address that will be given to you by the editor. Floppy discs are not used.

#### Please take note of the following style guidelines.

1. Footnotes should be used sparingly. If they are necessary, footnotes should be placed at the end of the article, not at the bottom of every page. Look at a recent issue of the magazine for the format. Book, film and magazine titles are in italics, titles of articles are in double quotes.

For example:

3. Rick Altman, "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," *Refiguring American Film Genres*, ed. Nick Browne, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998, p. 1.

2. Character/actor citations as such:

Norman Bates/Tony Perkins

3. Quotations should be preceded and followed by a line space. No quotation marks are required.

4. Double quotation marks are used throughout. The closed quotation mark usually follows a period or comma.

6. Include a word count of your article.

7. Include a very brief author's biography.





# cineACTION ORDER FORM

Mail to  
**CineAction**  
40 Alexander St.  
Suite 705  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada  
M4Y 1B5

## SUBSCRIPTIONS

ONE YEAR (3 issues)	\$21 Individual	\$40 Institutions
TWO YEARS (6 issues)	\$36 Individual	\$70 Institutions

POSTAGE: U.S. orders payable in U.S. dollars.

Abroad add \$15 for 1 year, \$25 for 2 year subscription

Please start  
my subscription  
with issue # \_\_\_\_\_

## TO PURCHASE BACK ISSUES

Use the list of back issues on the facing page to select  
what you would like to order. List your selections below.

ISSUES # \_\_\_\_\_

Price per single issue: Canada \$6 CAN U.S.A. \$7US Abroad \$9

Price per double issue: Canada \$8 CAN U.S.A. \$9US Abroad \$11

AMOUNT ENCLOSED \$ \_\_\_\_\_

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_

PROV/STATE \_\_\_\_\_

COUNTRY \_\_\_\_\_

CODE \_\_\_\_\_



